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SC quashes rape case as survivor marries accused

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India gets its first bomb disposal systems

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SPORTS

England snap 15-year losing streak to win 4th Ashes Test

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SALAR

DIGITAL ENGLISH DAILY, BENGALURU

سالار روزنامہ بنگلور

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Unnao rape survivor moves CBI against probe officer

NEW DELHI, 27 DEC

The survivor of the 2017 Unnao rape case, in which former BJP MLA Kuldeep Singh Sengar was convicted, has approached the CBI seeking registration of an FIR against the then investigating officer, alleging he acted "hand in glove" with the legislator. She also said that she and her family were facing threats from various quarters. The move comes amid widespread disappointment after the Delhi High Court recently granted conditional bail to Sengar and suspended his life sentence. Meanwhile, Delhi Police on Saturday detained activist Yogita Bhayana, Congress leader Mumtaz Patel and others protesting near Parliament against the bail. Supreme Court will hear the matter on Monday. *— PTI*

African Cheetah dies of meningitis in Mysuru zoo

MYSURU, 27 DEC

A six-year and eight-month-old African hunting cheetah died at Mysuru zoo on Saturday. According to a press release, the cat, which was affectionately called Bruke, had been refusing to eat food for the last three days. Even though Mysuru Zoo veterinarians provided all the required treatment, the animal did not respond and died on at 1.30am due to meningitis. Bruke was acquired from Anne Van Dyk Cheetah Centre South Africa on 17 August, 2020, the release said. *—Salar News*

India starts 'One Stop Centre for Women' in Canada

NEW DELHI, 27 DEC

The Consulate General of India in Toronto has established a One Stop Centre for Women (OSCW) to provide dedicated assistance to Indian passport-holder women in distress in Canada. The Centre is supported by a 24x7 helpline and aims to offer timely help to women facing domestic violence, abuse, family conflict, abandonment, exploitation and legal challenges. Run by a woman Centre Administrator, the OSCW will provide beneficiary-centred support, including immediate counselling, psycho-social assistance and coordination of legal advice, while facilitating access to relevant community and social services in Canada. All interventions will be carried out strictly within the framework of Canadian laws. *—PTI*

Half-metre cloth left in woman's belly after delivery

NOIDA, 27 DEC

An FIR has been lodged against doctors of a private hospital in Greater Noida and senior health department officials after a woman alleged that a half-metre-long surgical cloth was left inside her abdomen during a childbirth procedure in 2023, police said on Saturday. The police registered the FIR on 24 December against doctors Anjana Agarwal and Manish Goyal. The complainant, Anshul Verma, said she underwent a delivery procedure at Bakson Hospital, Tughlakpur, on 14 November, 2023, performed by Dr Agarwal. She later developed severe stomach pain and approached Kailash Hospital, where surgery on 22 April, 2025, revealed and removed the cloth. *— PTI*

Cong to launch 'MGNREGA Bachao Abhiyan' from 5 Jan

With nationwide stir, Cong to fight G RAM G bill like farm laws

NEW DELHI, 27 DEC

The Congress on Saturday announced a nationwide campaign against the repeal of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), with protests set to begin from 5 January. The party said its agitation would mirror the mass movement against the now-repealed farm laws.

Announcing the decision after a nearly three-hour meeting of the Congress Working Committee (CWC), party president Mallikarjun Kharge said the Congress would launch the 'MGNREGA Bachao Abhiyan', with rallies planned across the country. Rahul Gandhi was present at the press conference.

The meeting, the first after the party's setback in the Bihar Assembly elections, saw Congress leaders take an oath to protect MGNREGA "at all costs" and to collectively fight for the right to dignity, employment and timely wages for workers.

Cong leaders Sonia Gandhi, Mallikarjun Kharge and Rahul Gandhi at the CWC meeting held in New Delhi's Indira Bhawan on Saturday *PHOTO: PTI*

The VB G RAM G Bill, which replaces the 20-year-old MGNREGA, was passed during the Winter Session of Parliament amid strong opposition protests. Kharge said MGNREGA was not merely a welfare scheme but a constitutional "Right to Work".

Reading out the pledge, Kharge said the party would oppose any attempt to remove Mahatma Gandhi's name from the scheme and convert workers' rights into a government dole. "People are angry over the repeal of MGNREGA and the government will have to face the consequences," he said.

On the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls, Kharge alleged a "well-planned conspiracy" involving the BJP and the Election Commission to curb democratic rights. He urged party workers to ensure that the names of Dalits, tribals, backward classes and minorities were not deleted, asking booth-level agents to go door to door, particularly in states facing elections in 2027. Rahul Gandhi alleged the repeal would "benefit Mr Adani in full measure" by diverting resources from the poor. The party also condemned attacks on Hindu minorities in Bangladesh, while MP Shashi Tharoor said such incidents should not be equated with attacks on minorities in India. Kharge further alleged that attacks on Christmas celebrations by organisations linked to the BJP and RSS had damaged communal harmony and India's global image. *—PTI*

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Allu Arjun, 23 others booked in stampede case

HYDERABAD, 27 DEC

The city police have filed a chargesheet in a court here against 23 people, including top Telugu actor Allu Arjun, in connection with the death of a woman in a stampede during the premiere of the film 'Pushpa-2' at a theatre here last year.

Arjun has been named as accused No. 11 in the charge sheet filed on 24 December and has been charged with abetting the crime. The theatre's owner, manager, lower balcony in-charge and gatekeeper were named as accused No. 1 to 10.

The chargesheet also names Arjun's managers, his guards, fans association in-charge and event organiser/electrician as accused.

Hyderabad Police Commissioner V C Sajjanar said on Saturday that the investigation established lapses in planning, crowd management, security arrangements and coordination among the theatre management, event organisers and private security personnel, the Commissioner said.

"A charge sheet was filed on 24 December. 23 persons have been charge sheeted. Of these, 14 were arrested, while nine accused, who obtained anticipatory bail, were issued notices," he said. Arjun was arrested after a woman, 35, died and her eight-year-old son was injured in a stampede during the screening of 'Pushpa 2' at Sandhya theatre on 4 December 2024. *— PTI*

Kalaburagi woman beaten to death

KALABURAGI, 27 DEC

A woman from Kalaburagi was beaten to death with a neem stick on the suspicion that she was possessed by an evil spirit. The incident occurred in Murum village of Solapur district in Maharashtra.

The deceased, Muktabai, 25, was a resident of Aland taluk in Kalaburagi district. She was married six years ago to Giddeppa, a resident of Murum village, and the couple has a five-year-old son.

According to reports, Muktabai had recently exhibited changes in her behaviour, which her family attributed to possession by an "evil spirit". Believing this, her husband Giddeppa and other relatives allegedly assaulted her with a neem stick in an attempt to drive away the spirit. Muktabai died on the spot due to the assault.

The deceased woman is 25-year-old Muktabai *PHOTO: SALAR*

A case has been registered at the Murum police station, and Giddeppa and others have been taken into custody. The exact cause of death will be known after the post-mortem examination.

The incident has once again highlighted how superstition and unscientific practices continue to claim lives instead of people seeking mental health treatment. The public has demanded awareness campaigns in rural areas to prevent such tragedies. *—Salar News*

3 arrested for 'stalking and harassing' woman in Bengaluru

BENGALURU, 27 DEC

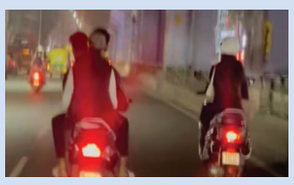
Three youths were arrested for allegedly stalking and harassing a woman here, police said on Saturday.

The incident occurred on 24 December when the woman was riding her two-wheeler from Jayanagar Metro Station towards BTM Layout, they said.

The accused, include an 18-year-old garage worker and two others aged 19, who work at a chicken shop, police added.

A video of the incident was recorded by a commuter and later shared on social media, tagging the Bengaluru Police and seeking action.

In a post on social media platform X, the woman, who identified herself as an actor in her profile, said three unknown men on a two-wheeler began following her, initially on a secluded road with sparse traffic and later continued to tail her even on the main road.



"Their behaviour irritated me a lot and made me feel really unsafe. I tried slowing down my vehicle to check if they would stop, but they continued following me until I reached the Udupi Garden signal," she said.

She added that after reaching the signal, she noticed the men were still present and immediately clicked a picture of their motorcycle from the fron Based on her complaint, an FIR was registered at SG Palya police station. *—PTI*

200 HOMES RAZED

A delegation of Kerala Rajya Sabha MPs led by AA Rahim visited Kogilu Layout in Bengaluru *PHOTO: PTI*

Kerala panel visits B'luru eviction site

BENGALURU, 27 DEC

- They claimed to have lived in the locality for years and said they had received temporary permission from the Bangalore North Tahsildar in 2017–18 to build houses.

The delegation of Kerala Rajya Sabha MPs led by AA Rahim visited Kogilu Layout in Bengaluru, where over 200 houses belonging to Dalit and Muslim Fakir families were demolished earlier this week, rendering nearly 400 families homeless.

The demolition was carried out on Monday by the Greater Bangalore Authority during one of the coldest weeks Bengaluru has experienced in recent years. Several displaced families were left without shelter, food or water and were forced to remain at the site under temporary arrangements.

Residents alleged that the eviction was conducted without any prior notice and under heavy police presence. They claimed to have lived in the locality for years and said they had received temporary permission from the Bangalore North Tahsildar in 2017–18 to build houses. Electricity and water connections had also been provided. Many residents produced Aadhaar cards and electricity bills to establish long-term residence, with some families claiming they had lived there for decades.

CPI(M) expressed solidarity with the affected families, condemning the action as illegal, inhumane and anti-poor. The party demanded that the state government take responsibility, provide immediate relief and reconstruct the demolished houses to protect the livelihoods of the displaced residents.

Civic authorities, however, defended the demolition. The evictions sparked a political row after Kerala Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan criticised the "bulldozer action". Chief Minister Siddaramaiah defended the drive as necessary, while Deputy Chief Minister DK Shivakumar and Minister Ramalinga Reddy asked Vijayan to refrain from interfering in Karnataka's affairs. *—Salar News*

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10.56 lakh names deleted in Assam's draft electoral rolls

GUWAHATI, 27 DEC

The names of 10.56 lakh voters have been deleted after the Special Intensive Revision of electoral rolls in Assam, where Assembly polls are due in less than six months.

According to the integrated draft rolls released by the Election Commission on Saturday, the state has 2,51,09,754 voters, excluding 93,021 D-Voters or doubtful voters.

Additionally, the names of 10,56,291 voters have been deleted due to deaths, shifting or multiple entries.

D-Voters are a category of voters in Assam who have been disenfranchised by the government on account of their alleged lack of proper citizenship credentials. D-Voters are determined by special tribunals under the Foreigners Act, 1946, and the person declared as a D-Voter is not given a voter ID card.

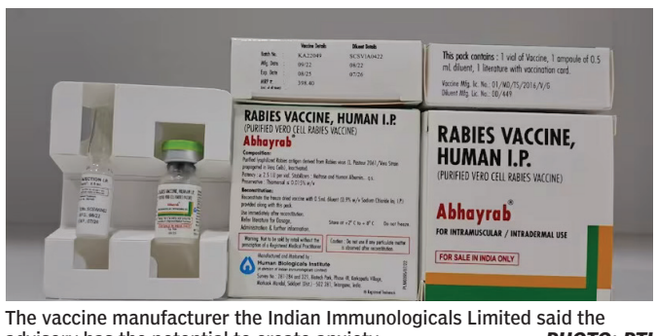
A BLO helps residents fill out electoral forms during SIR of electoral rolls ahead of the Assam Assembly election in Guwahati *PHOTO: PTI*

All related particulars, such as name, age and photograph, of D-Voters have been carried forward to the draft electoral roll without any change.

The draft rolls were published after house-to-house verification held from 22 November to 20 December. Now, voters will be able to file claims and objections till 22 January, and the final electoral rolls will be published on 10 February, a statement said. Of the 10.56 lakh, 4,78,992 names were deleted due to deaths, 5,23,680 voters were found to have moved from their registered addresses, and 53,619 demographically similar entries were identified for correction, it said. *— PTI*

IS NOTHING SAFE ANYMORE?

Australia flags fake rabies vaccine in India, pharma firm refutes


RABIES VACCINE, HUMAN I.P.
(PURIFIED VERO CELL RABIES VACCINE)
Abhayrab
FOR INTRAMUSCULAR / INTRADERMAL USE
FOR SALE IN INDIA ONLY

The vaccine manufacturer the Indian Immunologicals Limited said the advisory has the potential to create anxiety. *PHOTO: PTI*

NEW DELHI, 27 DEC

Days after Australia issued an advisory against counterfeit rabies vaccine in India, a public sector manufacturer of the vaccine 'Abhayrab' clarified that the concern revolves around a specific batch identified in January 2025, and did not merit a blanket warning against it.

The vaccine manufacturer, the Indian Immunologicals Limited (IIL), said the advisory has the potential to create anxiety. It asked the Australian government to consider reviewing its advisory.

Around a week ago, the Australian Technical Advisory Group on Immunisation (ATAGI) said Australians who have been administered the anti-rabies vaccine Abhayrab in India after 1 November, 2023, should consider the vaccination invalid and take a new course.

The IIL has written to ATAGI, strongly refuting the "over-cautionary reference" regarding a batch of vaccine manufactured in March 2024, and said it had identified a packaging anomaly in one specific batch in January 2025, and worked with authorities to ensure swift action.

"The counterfeiting involves Abhayrab, Batch No. KA24014 (manufacturing date: March 2024; expiry date: February 2027) was identified by us in January 2025. This represents the first such incident in IIL's history," said the letter sent on 25 December.

The Delhi Drugs Control Department issued an advisory/notification on 23 March 2025, which was specific to Batch No. KA24014.

"Abhayrab, Batch No. KA24014, manufactured by us, was distributed across India through our authorised distribution channels, and no complaints were reported. This proves the quality of our vaccine. There is no instance of any other counterfeit batch in the market," the IIL stressed. *— PTI*

PHOTO: PTI

Bandipur forest watcher dies in tiger attack

MYSURU, 27 DEC

A 55-year-old forest watcher was killed by a tiger attack near Marahalli camp in Bandipur tiger reserve on Saturday. The tiger attacked him roughly 500 meters away from the camp when he was on his routine patrol. According to forest officials, the deceased has been identified as Sannahaida. He was working in the forest department for the last 25 years. Senior forest department officials inspected the spot, and announced Rs 45 lakh as compensation. Sannahaida hails from Neralakuppe tribal hamlet of Hunsur taluk. *—Salar News*

President to visit Karwar Naval Base today

UTTARA KANNADA, 27 DEC

President Droupadi Murmu will undertake a sea voyage aboard a submarine at the Karwar Naval Base on Sunday, according to information released by the Rashtrapati Bhavan. Droupadi Murmu will become the first woman President of India to travel in a submarine. APJ Abdul Kalam was the first President to undertake a submarine voyage; in 2006, he spent 3.5 hours aboard the INS Sindhurakshak submarine in the Bay of Bengal. President Droupadi Murmu will embark on a similar sea voyage from the Karwar Naval Base. In view of the President's visit, fishing activities have been restricted until 3:30pm on that day along the coastal stretch from Harwada to Majali. Further, President Droupadi Murmu will visit Goa, and Jharkhand as part of her three-day tour. *—Salar News*

M'rashtra cops bust 3 B'luru drug units; 4 arrested

MUMBAI, 27 DEC

The Maharashtra Anti-Narcotics Task Force (ANTF) has dismantled three mephedrone manufacturing units in Bengaluru, arresting four individuals and seizing drugs valued at Rs 55.88 crore. The operation commenced on 21 December when the Konkan unit of ANTF apprehended Abdul Qadir Rashid Shaikh in Vashi, Navi Mumbai, with 1.488 kilograms of mephedrone worth Rs 1.48 crore. Shaikh subsequently led authorities to Prashant Yallappa Patil in Belgaum, identified as a key figure in the drug production. Raids conducted under the supervision of ANTF chief Sharda Raut and Superintendent MM Makandar resulted in the capture of Suraj Ramesh Yadav and Malkhan Ramlal Bishnoi, who confessed to synthesising drugs. Officials are pursuing two additional suspects linked to the network. *—PTI*

Supporters protest in Delhi, demand HM becomes CM

NEW DELHI, 27 DEC

Supporters of Home Minister and Congress leader Dr G Parameshwara on Saturday gathered near Indira Bhawan in Delhi, demanding he be appointed as the next Chief Minister of Karnataka. Parameshwara's supporters are backing him due to his strong party backing and efforts to consolidate SC/ST support. They urged the Congress party to appoint a Dalit leader as the State's next Chief Minister. A supporter said, "We have come from Karnataka to Delhi to demand a Dalit CM for Karnataka. If Siddaramaiah is ever to be removed as the CM, he should be replaced with G Parameshwara." The protest comes despite CM Siddaramaiah and DyCM DK Shivakumar appearing to bury the hatchet amid the ongoing power struggle. *—ANI*

Don't interfere: DKS, CM slam Vijayan

After Kerala CM voiced concern about 'bulldozer justice', CM says will rehabilitate residents

BENGALURU, 27 DEC

Deputy Chief Minister DK Shivakumar on Saturday advised Kerala Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan not to interfere in Karnataka's affairs with regard to an anti-encroachment drive in North Bengaluru. Similarly, Chief Minister Siddaramaiah said that Vijayan was making "politically motivated" statements.

Vijayan on Friday criticised the demolition of Muslim residential areas of Fakir Colony and Waseem Layout in Kogilu Layout near Yelahanka, calling it "bulldozer justice".

"Without knowing the facts, Pinarayi should not interfere in our State's affairs. These are all political gimmicks at the time of the elections," Shivakumar, who is also Congress state president, said.

It is unfortunate that senior leaders like Vijayan commented on the matter, Shivakumar asserted. He added that no bulldozers were used in it.

"Some people had encroached. It's a waste dump site. It was a quarry pit. It is a very dangerous place. A lot of health hazard is there and they (slum dwellers) illegally tried to occupy. It's land grabbing. Our government and the local MLA (Krishna Byre Gowda) said this is very dangerous," the Deputy CM said.

Shivakumar said that the slum dwellers came and captured the land overnight.

"We tried to protect our land, and we are ready to give houses to those who are eligible, under the Rajiv Gandhi Awas Yojana. Our Chief Minister Siddaramaiah and I have directed officers to submit a report, which they did," he said, adding that he would send the report to Vijayan and senior Congress leaders soon. "We can't encourage slums like this... It is not a question of minorities or other people."

Meanwhile, Siddaramaiah in a statement said that multiple notices were given to the residents to evacuate, but they failed to comply.

"It became unavoidable to clear the encroachment and vacate the site," he said. "I have spoken to the Commissioner of the Greater Bengaluru Authority (GBA) and directed that temporary shelter, food, and other essential facilities be arranged for all those affected. While most of the occupants were migrant workers and not local residents, the government will nevertheless ensure appropriate accommodation on humanitarian grounds." *—Agencies*

The Karnataka government demolished at least 200 homes in Kogilu Layout, Yelahanka last week, claiming that they had enchroached land belonging to Bengaluru Solid Waste Management Limited (BSWML) ***PHOTO: X@CPIMSPEAK***

> **There is a fundamental difference between 'bulldozer justice' and the lawful removal of illegal encroachments. The criticism being made by Vijayan is politically motivated and reflects a lack of understanding of the factual situation**
>
> -Siddaramaiah, Karnataka CM

> **It is a routine thing that takes place in Bengaluru. You know that Bengaluru is not like Mumbai or any other city. We don't have many slums in Bengaluru, and we don't want to create slums in Bengaluru**
>
> -DK Shivakumar, Karnataka Deputy Chief Minister

> **The bulldozing of Fakir Colony and Wasim Layout, where Muslims have been living for years... (is) another version of the anti-minority aggressive politics practiced by the Sangh Parivar in North India... How can the Congress justify such mass evictions?**
>
> -Pinayan Vijayan, Kerala Chief Minister

Mangalore diocese condemns attacks on Christians

MANGALURU, 27 DEC

The Diocese of Mangalore on Saturday strongly condemned a series of incidents targeting members of the Christian community in different parts of the country during the Christmas season and urged both the central and state governments to take immediate steps to ensure the safety and security of minorities.

In a statement, Roy Castelino, Public Relations Officer of the Diocese, described the incidents as "highly condemnable" and said they reflected a disturbing pattern of intimidation and violence against Christians.

The Diocese cited several incidents across the country. In Palakkad district of Kerala, members of a Christmas carol team were allegedly attacked by extremist elements. In New Delhi, activists linked to a Hindu organisation were accused of harassing Christian women and children wearing Santa Claus caps, allegedly accusing them of engaging in religious conversion.

"These acts are not only against a particular community but are against the spirit and values enshrined in the Constitution," the statement said.

The Diocese pointed to an alleged contradiction between the Prime Minister's participation in Christmas prayers at a church in Delhi and the attacks in states, including Kerala, Delhi, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Uttarakhand and Odisha. *—PTI*

Centre repealed MGNREGA by renaming it, says Priyank

BENGALURU, 27 DEC

Minister Priyank Kharge on Saturday criticised the Modi government at the Centre, alleging it has effectively repealed the MGNREGA by passing the VB-G RAM G Bill in Parliament without any discussion, thereby stripping rural citizens of their guaranteed right to livelihood.

The Rural Development and Panchayat Raj Minister said on Saturday in the City that the new Viksit Bharat Guarantee for Rozgar and Ajivika Mission (VB G-RAM-G), does not reform, simplify or strengthen MGNREGA.

He noted that for the past 19 years, the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act had functioned as a demand-based employment guarantee scheme that provided a safety net for livelihoods in rural India.

"Today, the Modi government has snatched that away that guarantee," he alleged, noting the scheme was now supply-driven. "Earlier, if I had a job guarantee card, I could demand work anywhere. Now, I will get work only when it is notified. This is no longer a right."

Priyank alleged that the new legislation has taken away three fundamental rights.

"First, it takes away the right to livelihood. Second, it snatches away the powers of Panchayats to decentralise under the Panchayat Raj system. Third, it puts additional financial burden on the state governments without consulting them," he said. "This has been introduced only to help wealthy landowners bypass minimum wage rules." *—PTI*

City man arrested for murdering wife over job dispute

BENGALURU, 27 DEC

A man was arrested for allegedly killing his wife following a quarrel over her job, police said on Saturday.

According to police, this was the third marriage for the deceased Ayisha Siddiqi, 39, worked as a masseur at a parlour

and a second marriage for her husband.

The couple frequently argued over her job, as the accused objected to her receiving regular calls from her workplace and had asked her to quit, which she refused.

On Wednesday, the accused, Saiyed Jabi, allegedly slit her throat with a pair of scissors at their residence in Agrahara Layout following a heated argument over the issue.

Later, the accused went to a police station and confessed to the crime, they said, adding that a case of murder was registered at Sampigehalli Police Station. *—PTI*

Congress has failed on all fronts: Vijayendra

BENGALURU, 27 DEC

State BJP President BY Vijayendra lashed out at the Siddaramaiah government, alleging that there was absolutely zero development and that corruption has peaked. He said the Congress government had failed on all fronts, be it the Dharamshala issue, the hate speech Bill, the Chinnaswamy Stadium stampede, the liquor policy or corruption.

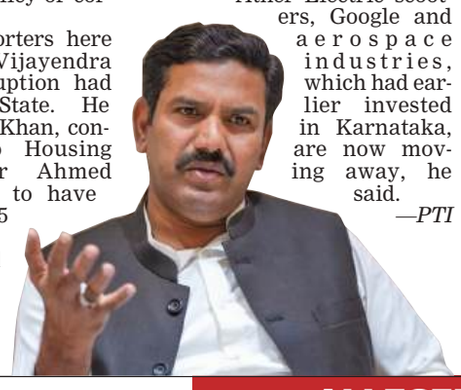
Speaking to reporters here on Saturday, Vijayendra alleged that corruption had increased in the State. He said that Sarfaraz Khan, considered close to Housing Minister Zameer Ahmed Khan, was found to have assets worth Rs 14.5 crore.

He also referred to the Valmiki Development Corporation scam, which took place during the 2024 Lok Sabha election.

Referring to the Hate Speech Bill passed by both Houses of the legislature, he said that the Siddaramaiah Government is trying to suppress criticism and compared the move to the Emergency imposed in 1975.

He said that investors were dumping Karnataka due to the "anti-investor policies" .

Ather Electric scooters, Google and aerospace industries, which had earlier invested in Karnataka, are now moving away, he said. *—PTI*



K'taka, Andhra bus theft gang nabbed in Delhi

NEW DELHI, 27 DEC

Deelhi Police have arrested a 41-year-old man for his alleged role in thefts and dacoities on moving buses in Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. The accused, Mohammad Farman, a resident of Amroha in Uttar Pradesh, was part of an organised interstate gang, police said. The gang posed as passengers or bus staff to target sleeping passengers during early morning hours. Farman is accused of fleeing after stealing 10 kg of silver and Rs 3 lakh in cash from a bus in Karnataka. He was arrested on December 26 near an NHAI toll plaza in Gurugram following a request from Karnataka Police. *—PTI*

AVARE MELA

Actors Tara and Bhavya Gowda with MLA Uday Garudachar and others during the inauguration of 'Avare Mela', at National College Grounds, on Saturday. Avarekai (Hyacinth Beans/Field Beans) is a seasonal favourite in State

PHOTO: MOHAMMED ASAD

ALLEGED RACKET

KIA flags fraudsters posing as Customs officials

BENGALURU, 27 DEC

The Customs Department at the Kempegowda International Airport issued an alert after detecting a racket in which fraudsters posing as customs officials extort money from the public.

Customs said that fraudsters are targeting the poor through phone calls, social media and messaging platforms.

The scammers falsely claim that a passenger coming from abroad has been detained by Customs, and demand payment to "resolve" the issue.

The Customs Commissioner said, "Customs officials never contact people via phone, WhatsApp, or social media to demand payment of fines. Moreover, we do not accept money into personal bank accounts. All payments to the government are made only through authorised counters or online portals."

Explaining the modus operandi, Customs officials said the fraudsters first befriend the victims, and later claim that a friend or relative of theirs has been stopped at the airport.

They threaten the victims with jail unless Customs duty is paid immediately, prompting the victims to transfer large sums to personal bank accounts, UPI IDs or digital wallets. Once the money is transferred, the fraudsters cut all communication.

The Customs department clarified that no passenger is harassed for non-payment of duty, and that all procedures are carried out as per rules, and under CCTVs at the airport.

The Customs urged people not to respond to calls seeking money in the name of Customs.

Those who get such calls should report the matter by emailing commrapacc-cus-blr@gov.in or by contacting the cybercrime helpline at 1930. *—PTI*

Customs officials sai fraudsters would befriend victims and the claim a friend had stopped at the airport and ask for money

PHOTO: X

- Customs Commissioner said, "officials never contact people via phone, WhatsApp, or social media to demand payment of fines"

Probe ordered into giant wheel accident in M'luru

MANGALURU, 27 DEC

An inquiry has been initiated following a complaint from a city resident that a giant wheel ride malfunctioned at the Karavali Utsava grounds on 24 December, leaving him and his two children injured, police said on Saturday.

According to police, in his complaint, K Mohan Mulali alleged that when the giant wheel began operating at high speed and the cabin they were seated in suddenly dropped and collided with another.

He alleged that the cabin doors broke mid-ride, causing the occupants to be violently thrown inside the enclosure multiple times.

"The complaint prima facie indicates negligence and poor maintenance. We have sought details from the ride operators and will examine whether safety norms were violated," Mangaluru Police Commissioner Sudheer Kumar Reddy said.

Mulali alleged that no immediate medical assistance was provided at the site. He claimed there was no first-aid facility or ambulance available and that bystanders helped the injured family.

A district official overseeing Karavali Utsava arrangements said the operators were reprimanded and added that "We are reviewing safety protocols for all amusement rides."

Police said a case would be registered if violations are proved. *—PTI*

Army, Assam Rifles hold joint drill in Arunachal Pradesh

ITANAGAR, 27 DEC

The Indian Army and Assam Rifles carried out a joint helicopter-borne troop insertion exercise in the strategically sensitive Vijaynagar salient in Changlang district, Arunachal Pradesh, on Friday. The drill tested rapid deployment capabilities and operational readiness in difficult, remote terrain, with acclimatised troops swiftly inducted into a simulated operational area. Defence spokesperson Lt Col Mahendra Rawat said the exercise focused on speed, and coordination, demonstrating the forces' ability to deploy efficiently under near-real conditions. He added that troops showed high professionalism, adaptability and combat readiness. The operation also strengthened understanding between Army and Assam Rifles. *—PTI*

PHOTO: SCREENGRAB

BJP youth leader kills two in Morena car crash

MORENA, 27 DEC

A BJP youth leader killed an 11-year-old boy and a 65-year-old man after ploughing into a group in the Morena district of Madhya Pradesh, a police official said. Dipendra Bhadoria, Porsa urban mandal president of the Bharatiya Janata Yuva Morcha, was allegedly intoxicated when his car lost control on Friday night, hitting people gathered around a bonfire, eyewitnesses said. The victims, Ramdatt Rathore and Arnav "Annu" Lashkar, were taken to Gwalior for treatment but died after midnight. Three others remain hospitalised. Bhadoria was initially caught by locals, briefly escaped police custody, and was re-arrested. Residents blocked the highway in protest. Post mortems are scheduled before the last rites in Porsa. *—PTI*

Lanka police detain Tamil politician for questioning

COLOMBO, 27 DEC

A Sri Lankan Tamil politician and former minister was detained for questioning after a firearm issued to him was found with a criminal, police said on Friday. Douglas Devananda was taken into custody by the Crime Investigation Department under a court order. According to the police, the weapon officially allotted to him surfaced with a noted underworld figure, who was extradited from Dubai in 2020 and later killed in a police shootout.

Devananda, leader of the Eelam People's Democratic Party (EPDP), is a former Tamil militant and has held ministerial posts between 1994 and 2024. A Chennai court declared him a proclaimed offender in the year 1996 in connection with a 1986 Choolaimedu shootout case. *—PTI*

Assam polls fight to protect 'swajati', says CM Himanta

GUWAHATI, 27 DEC

Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma on Saturday said that the upcoming assembly elections will be a fight to protect 'swadesh' (nation) and 'swajati' (own community). Speaking at the party's executive meeting, CM stated that BJP represents the last light of hope that will ensure that the state is not pushed into an abyss of darkness by infiltrators from Bangladesh. "The forthcoming elections are not about hopes and aspirations. It is about dedicating oneself to the cause of protecting 'swadesh' and 'swajati'. I am sure people know that the BJP is their last hope. They will vote for us, and we will win this election," Sarma said, adding that BJP will be the shining light for the people of Assam. *—PTI*

PM destroyed MGNREGA, is attacking states: RaGa

Says scrapping of MGNREGA will ruin the rural economy

NEW DELHI, 27 DEC

The Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha, Rahul Gandhi, accused Prime Minister Narendra Modi of "single-handedly destroying" MGNREGA without consulting his Cabinet or states, and without studying the matter, and described it as an attack on democracy that will ruin the rural economy.

Addressing a press conference after a Congress Working Committee (CWC) meeting here on Saturday, he targeted the NDA government over the VB-G RAM G Act, alleging that the PM carried out a devastating attack on states and the poor, like demonetisation. He said the Congress would fight the government's action and expressed confidence that the entire opposition would support it.

"We are going to fight it, and I am confident that the entire opposition will stand united against this," he said, referring to the Congress's 'MGNREGA Bachao Abhiyan' that it plans to launch nationwide on 5 January.

Congress leaders Rahul Gandhi and KC Venugopal after the Congress Working Committee meeting in New Delhi on Saturday PHOTO: PTI

Claiming that the UPA-era MGNREGA was not just a work programme, but a development framework appreciated around the world, Gandhi claimed that its repeal was an attack on a rights-based approach and the country's federal structure.

"The MGNREGA, apart from being a rights-based programme, also strengthened panchayats. It injected money into panchayats, and allowed decision-making at the panchayat level," Gandhi explained.He linked the decision to scrap MGNREGA to the decimation of Indian labour, saying that MGNREGA guaranteed a minimum floor below which Indian wages could not fall.

No new anti-graft measures in VB-G RAM G

The VB-G RAM G Act has no new provisions to tackle corruption, LibTech India said on Saturday and asserted that technology should not be the sole gateway to employment and accountability.

In a statement here, the consortium of academicians and activists noted that the lack of new anti-graft provisions is surprising, as corruption mitigation was cited as justification for MGNREGA repeal. The statement also emphasised the need for complementing digital systems with strong and clearly defined offline counterparts. *—PTI*

RIFT OUT IN OPEN

Digvijaya stirs row with pic of Modi, RSS praise

NEW DELHI, 27 DEC

Senior Congress leader Digvijaya Singh sparked a political storm ahead of the Congress Working Committee (CWC) meeting after praising the organisational strength of the RSS-BJP, sharing an old photograph of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and citing his rise from a grassroots worker to chief minister and prime minister.

The BJP seized on the remarks, calling them "open dissent" against Rahul Gandhi's leadership. Singh's comments came before the CWC finalised its agitational programme against the scrapping of MGNREGA from 5 January. Sources said Singh raised the need to strengthen the Congress organisation at the grassroots but was stopped by senior leaders from straying beyond the agenda. Party chief Mallikarjun Kharge reportedly intervened, asking

him to allow others to speak. Singh later clarified that he was praising organisational strength, not the BJP or RSS.

"You have misunderstood. I am a staunch opponent of the BJP and the RSS," he said, adding that decentralisation had guided his own tenure.

BJP widens attack

Separately, the BJP accused Congress leader Sam Pitroda of revealing the party's links with the Global Progressive Alliance, alleging Rahul's overseas engagements promote "anti-India narratives". Congress is yet to reply. *—PTI*

In their resignation letters, the leader said the local Congress leadership had ignored loyal workers. PHOTO: SCREENGRAB

Cong exit aids BJP to seize Kerala Panchayat

THRISSUR, 27 DEC

In a surprise realignment in Kerala's Thrissur district, all eight elected Congress members of the Mattathur panchayat resigned together and backed the BJP, ending the Left Democratic Front's 23-year control of the local body.

The shift cleared the way for Congress dissident Tessy Jose Kallaraykkal to become panchayat president with BJP support, heading a newly formed alliance.

The 24-member council had delivered a tight verdict: LDF 10, UDF 8, NDA 4 and two Independents, leaving the leadership contest finely balanced.The UDF initially planned to back KR Ouseph, an Independent elected as a Congress rebel. On the eve of the vote, however, Ouseph aligned with the LDF, jolting Congress leaders and altering the numbers.

Citing unfair treatment and neglect by the local leadership, the eight Congress councillors quit and rallied behind Tessy Jose, who contested as an Independent.

She won with the backing of 12 members, including three BJP votes, while one BJP vote was declared invalid.

Those who resigned are Minimol, Sreeja, Suma Antony, Akshay Santhosh, Printo Palliparamban, CG Rajesh, CB Paulose and Noorjahan Nawaz. The episode has unsettled the Congress party. *— Agencies*

EC axed lakhs of WB voters' to aid BJP: TMC

KOLKATA, 27 DEC

The Trinamool Congress (TMC) on Saturday accused the Election Commission (EC) of deleting the names of lakhs of legitimate voters from West Bengal's electoral rolls under the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) exercise to benefit the BJP ahead of the 2026 Assembly elections.

A TMC delegation comprising ministers Chandrima Bhattacharya, Sashi Panja, Aroop Biswas, Manas Bhuniya and Malay Ghatak met Chief Electoral Officer (CEO) Manoj Agarwal in Kolkata and submitted a memorandum listing alleged irregularities.

Bhattacharya claimed that around 58 lakh genuine voters had been omitted by branding them as "unmapped" during cross-checking of "absent, shifted and duplicate" voters. She alleged that the move was part of a larger plan to delete nearly two crore voters to "punish the people of Bengal for repeatedly rejecting the BJP".

Biswas alleged that the EC's mobile application did not allow "unmapped" voters to submit required details through annexures of Forms 6 and 7, effectively depriving them of voting rights.

Separately, TMC MP Kakali Ghosh Dastidar claimed four members of her family — her two sons, mother and sister — had been called for SIR hearings despite being long-time voters. She termed the exercise "harassment" and said she would raise the issue strongly.

Meanwhile, SIR hearings began across West Bengal on Saturday, with voters queuing at 3,234 centres. About 32 lakh "unmapped" voters are to be covered in the first phase. The draft rolls published on 16 December excluded over 58 lakh names. *—PTI*

Kerala orders help desks for voters excluded from SIR

T'PURAM 27 DEC

Kerala government has ordered district collectors to set up help desks for voters missing from the draft electoral rolls published under the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) 2025.

An order dated 26 December stressed inclusion of all eligible voters and directed assistance for adding names excluded for various reasons. Help desks will function at village offices or nearby buildings, with temporary staff deployed. Outreach using Anganwadi, ASHA and Kudumbashree workers will target remote areas and ensure young first-time voters receive guidance. *—PTI*

Bengal govt officers flag concerns over voter deletions

KOLKATA, 27 DEC

An association of West Bengal government officers has flagged concerns over what it called "system-driven" deletions of voters from draft electoral rolls during the ongoing Special Intensive Revision (SIR).

In a representation to the state Chief Electoral Officer, the WBCS (Executive) Officers' Association said many electors were removed without enumeration forms being returned, bypassing the statutory role of electoral registration officers (EROs).

The Election Commission published draft rolls on 16 December, deleting over 58 lakh names. The association said law requires hearings before deletions and warned large-scale removals could infringe voters' rights and unfairly burden EROs. *—PTI*

SABARIMALA ROW: CONG LEADER HELD OVER AI PIC OF KERALA CM WITH ACCUSED

KOZHIKODE, 27 DEC

Congress leader N. Subarahmanian was arrested on Saturday for allegedly sharing an AI-generated image showing Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan with Unnikrishnan Potti, an accused in the Sabarimala gold case, along with a caption questioning their closeness.

Chevayoor police detained the Congress Affairs Committee member, registered a case against him, interrogated, and released him on station bail. The CPI(M) said the image was AI-generated.

Subarahmanian told reporters before his arrest that the image was taken from a video released by the Chief Minister's Office and claimed no action was taken against him.

He alleged the government targets critics of the chief minister.

Police booked him under BNS sections of the Kerala Police Act. *—PTI*

Zero FIR, WB cops sent to Odisha after migrant worker killed: Mamata

KOLKATA, 27 DEC

West Bengal CM Mamata Banerjee on Saturday said a zero FIR has been filed and a state police team dispatched to Odisha following the alleged killing of a migrant worker from West Bengal in Sambalpur district.

The 30-year-old man, identified as Jewel Rana, was reportedly beaten to death on 24 December after an altercation over a bidi. Banerjee added that police have arrested six accused.

Condemning what she described as "brutal oppression, harassment and violence" against Bengali-speaking people in BJP-ruled states, the CM said the government stood with migrant families facing intimidation and abuse. Referring to the Sambalpur incident, CM said workers from the Jangipur region of Murshidabad had faced repeated atrocities in Odisha.

She claimed migrant workers from Muslim-majority Murshidabad were returning home in fear and assured financial aid to the deceased's family. Banerjee reiterated its commitment to assist victims there. "Speaking the Bengali language can never be a crime," the Trinamool Congress supremo said. *—PTI*

Pune elections: NCP factions' alliance bid fails

PUNE, 27 DEC

Talks between the Nationalist Congress Party (Sharad Pawar) and the Ajit Pawar-led ruling NCP over a possible alliance for the next month's Pune civic polls appear to have hit a dead end, with the latter not agreeing to the Sharad Pawar-led party's proposal for contesting the elections on their respective poll symbols.

Elections to 29 municipal corporations in Maharashtra, including Mumbai and Pune, will be held on 15 January. The last date to file the nominations is 30 December.

Senior NCP (SP) leader Ankush Kakade said his party leadership in Pune met Deputy CM Ajit Pawar on Friday but talks over the possible alliance for Pune civic polls could not progress. He said the NCP (SP) working president Supriya Sule is also of the opinion that since NCP (SP) has been with Mahavikas Aghadi, the party will prefer to stay with its alliance partners - Congress and Shiv Sena (UBT). NCP's election symbol is an analogue alarm clock, while NCP (SP) has been allotted the symbol of a man blowing a 'turha' (traditional trumpet). Two days back, NCP (SP) city unit president, Prashant Jagtap resigned from the party amid the talks about alliance between two factions. Jagtap joined Congress on Friday.*—PTI*

95% OF BANK INFOS WRONG

CAG audit flags Rs 14,000 crore scam in PMKVY

NEW DELHI, 27 DEC

An audit by the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) has pointed out serious lapses in the Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY), one of the flagship schemes to skill youth.

While the total outlay for the scheme's three phases (2015–2022) was approximately Rs 14,500 crore, the audit focused on widespread data lapses, weak monitoring, and questionable outcomes rather than defining the entire amount as a "scam

The CAG report states that beneficiary records reveal bank account numbers, like '111111…', duplicated across thousands of candidates, along with the same photographs.

The report says that bank account details of 95.53 percent of the beneficiaries were given as zero, left blank, or were unavailable.

The audit was carried out at the Union Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship and the National Skill Development Corporation, along with physical surveys in the eight states of Assam, Bihar, Jharkhand, Kerala, Maharashtra, Odisha, Rajasthan and UP.

PMKVY was launched in 2015 to equip youth with industry-relevant skills. Between 2015 and 2022 the ministry released Rs 10,194 crore to the agencies responsible for implementation.

The scheme required candidates to have valid bank accounts as the Rs 500 incentive for certified candidates was to be paid via Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT). However, CAG's analysis related revealed that the 'bank account details' field contained only zeroes, 'null', 'N/A', or was blank for 90,66,264 of the 95,90,801 participants.

The ministry said that disbursement was done with Aadhaar seeding, which allows pay-outs only into Aadhaar-linked bank accounts.

The CAG also flagged cases where same photographs were used for beneficiaries in different states. The ministry said that no irregularities were found as payments were made via DBT. *—Agencies*

Rlys misses 2nd deadline for Kavach installation

NEW DELHI, 27 DEC

The Railway Ministry missed its December 2025 deadline to install the Kavach automatic train protection system on the New Delhi-Mumbai and New Delhi-Howrah routes, though officials remain hopeful of operationalising by 2026. Railway Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw told the Lok Sabha that only 25 per cent of the system is commissioned and ready for use.

Vaishnaw said Kavach Version 4.0 has been successfully commissioned on 738 route km, including the Palwal-Mathura-Nagda section (633 km) on the Delhi-Mumbai route and the Howrah-Bardhaman section (105 km) on the Delhi-Howrah route. Kavach field trials on passenger trains began in February 2016, and it was adopted as the national ATP system in July 2020. Station Kavach has been installed at 860 stations, track-side equipment covers 5,672 km. Version 3.2 was tested on 1,465 km of the South Central Railway before launching version 4.0 in July 2024.

- Kavach Version 4.0 has been successfully commissioned on 738 route km, including the Palwal-Mathura-Nagda section (633 km) on the Delhi-Mumbai route

Experts said the growing number of train operations makes technical aids like Kavach essential to reduce human error. Initially, only three companies were approved to install the system, but that number has risen to over five, with hopes of exceeding 20 by 2026. Officials noted that more than 50 manufacturers are needed to cover the 78,000km network, which continues to expand. *—PTI*

Policeman dies after being run over in Jharkhand

MEDININAGAR, 27 DEC

A 38-year-old policeman died on the spot after being run over by an unidentified vehicle in Jharkhand's Palamu district, an officer said on Saturday.

The accident took place near Diwan Bigaha in Haidernagar police station area late on Friday evening.

The deceased was identified as Sonu Singh, a native of Diwan Bigaha. He was posted in Ranchi.

Afzal Ansari, officer-in-charge of Haidernagar police station, said, "The accident took place when the victim was returning home from Bihar's Aurangabad, where he had gone on leave. An unidentified vehicle ran over him, leading to his death on the spot."A search has been launched to identify the vehicle, he said, adding further investigation is underway. *—PTI*

PHOTO: WIKIPEDIA

Akshaye Khanna exits 'Drishyam-3,' issued notice

MUMBAI, 27 DEC

Bollywood producer Kumar Mangat Pathak has announced that Jaideep Ahlawat will replace actor Akshaye Khanna in the upcoming film 'Drishyam 3', following Khanna's abrupt withdrawal from the film via text message. Pathak revealed that an agreement was signed last month, accompanied by an advance payment, but Khanna decided against participating, citing unspecified reasons. "Akshaye was aware we had been working on 'Drishyam 3' for two years," said Mangat Pathak. "We even negotiated his look, but he suddenly messaged saying, 'I'm not doing the film'." A legal notice has since been sent to the actor Akshaye Khanna for breach of agreement. The film is slated for release on 2 October of the next year. *—PTI*

Thousands witness Mandala Pooja at Sabarimala

SABARIMALA, 27 DEC

Thousands of pilgrims on Saturday thronged the Lord Ayyappa Temple here to witness the auspicious Mandala pooja at the holy Sabarimala hill, marking the culmination of the 41-day-long first leg of the annual pilgrimage season.

The pooja was performed after adorning the deity with "thanka anki", the sacred golden attire brought to the temple complex in a ceremonial procession on Friday evening.

The rituals were performed between 10.10am and 11.30am under the aegis of temple tantri (head priest), Kandararu Mahesh Mohanaru who adorned the idol with the attire, TDB officials here said.

Long queues of pilgrims, including those from other states, could be seen on Sannidhanam. *—PTI*

Op Kalnemi: 19 Bangladeshis held in Uttarakhand

DEHRADUN, 27 DEC

A total of 511 people, including 19 Bangladeshis, have been arrested in three districts of Uttarakhand under 'Operation Kalnemi' so far, officials said.

Operation Kalnemi is a statewide campaign launched by the Uttarakhand government in July 2025 to identify, crack down on, and arrest individuals indulging in illegal activities such as hypocrisy and fraud under the guise of religion and faith.

According to a government statement on Friday, more than 4,800 people have been verified in Haridwar, Dehradun and Udham Singh Nagar districts under the drive, of whom 511 have been arrested.

Chief Minister Pushkar Singh Dhami said the campaign is not against any particular community, but is aimed at protecting law and order and the dignity of 'Devbhoomi'. *—PTI*

SC quashes rape case as survivor marries accused

Says it had 'sixth sense' that couple can be brought together

NEW DELHI, 27 DEC

The Supreme Court has quashed the conviction of a man in a rape case after noting that the complainant and the accused have married each other, observing that their relationship was consensual and criminalised due to a misunderstanding.

A bench of Justices BV Nagarathna and Satish Chandra Sharma said that, on examining the facts, "we had a sixth sense that the appellant and the respondent prosecutrix could be brought together once again if they decided to marry each other". The court noted the parties married in July this year and have been living together since.

The verdict arose from an appeal against an April 2024 Madhya Pradesh High Court order refusing to suspend the sentence awarded by a trial court, which had convicted the man and sentenced him to ten years' rigorous imprisonment with a Rs 55,000 fine.

SC gave the verdict, observing that their relationship was consensual and criminalised due to a misunderstanding PHOTO: AI

The bench said it interacted with both parties in the presence of their parents, granted interim bail, and facilitated their marriage, adding that the families were satisfied with the outcome. Calling it a rare case, the court said the appellant ultimately benefited from the quashing of both conviction and sentence.

Invoking its powers under Article 142 of the Constitution, the court said it was doing "complete justice" by setting aside the FIR, conviction and sentence. It held that the relationship, which began after the parties met on social media in 2015, was consensual and intended to culminate in marriage.

- The bench said it interacted with both parties in the presence of their parents, granted interim bail, and facilitated their marriage, adding that the families were satisfied with the outcome

The court observed that a postponement of the marriage date may have caused insecurity, prompting the woman to file an FIR in November 2021 alleging a false promise of marriage.

Since the couple is now married and cohabiting, their counsel jointly sought quashing of proceedings.

The court allowed the plea, rendering the pending high court appeal infructuous. It also ordered reinstatement immediately. *—PTI*

'EARLY MORNING FLIGHTS HIT'

Commuters make their way as a layer of smog engulfs the India Gate, during a winter morning, at Kartavya Path, in New Delhi PHOTO: PTI

Fog & cold disrupt flight services across northern stretch

NEW DELHI, 27 DEC

Dense fog and intense cold disrupted air and surface conditions across north, east and northwest India, grounding flights, slowing operations and pushing temperatures sharply lower on Saturday.

Airlines issued fresh advisories as visibility plunged at several airports, while weather offices warned that wintry conditions would persist in the coming days.

IndiGo and SpiceJet cautioned passengers about delays, diversions and cancellations, particularly during early morning hours.

IndiGo said low visibility could affect Agartala, Bagdogra and Hindon, and flagged slower operations at Amritsar, Chandigarh and Ranchi.

"The fluctuating visibility has led to changes in flight schedules," the airline said, adding that ground teams were prioritising safety and regulatory compliance. SpiceJet warned that arrivals, departures and consequential flights at Bagdogra may be impacted. Jaisalmer airport also issued a fog advisory.

Chandigarh airport was among the worst hit on Friday, with multiple arrivals and at least seven departures cancelled after dense fog made safe take-offs and landings impossible, officials said. Passengers were advised to check flight status before travelling.

Air quality in parts of Delhi remained poor, with the CPCB recording an AQI of 252 at Dhaula Kuan as smog blanketed the city.

Cold conditions intensified across Punjab and Haryana. Punjab's Ballowal Saunkhri recorded 4.4 degrees Celsius, while Gurugram was the coldest in Haryana at 4.9 degrees. Chandigarh logged a minimum of 6.9 degrees.

In Kashmir, night temperatures dipped below freezing at most places. Srinagar recorded minus 2.6 degrees, while Sonamarg was the coldest at minus 5.8 degrees.

The IMD forecast dry weather till December. *—Agencies*

PROJECT VALUED AT RS 3.2K CR

Hydel project on Chenab gets nod amid Indus Treaty suspension

NEW DELHI, 27 DEC

A government green panel has cleared the 260 megawatt Dulhasti Stage-II hydropower project on the Chenab river in Jammu and Kashmir's Kishtwar district, a decision that comes amid India's suspension of the Indus Waters Treaty.

The Expert Appraisal Committee on hydel projects granted approval during its 45th meeting earlier this month, allowing construction tenders for the run-of-the-river project, estimated to cost over Rs 3,200 crore.

The clearance assumes significance as the Centre accelerates projects in the Indus basin after putting the 1960 Indus Waters Treaty in abeyance following the April terror attack in Pahalgam.

Meeting minutes noted that the Chenab basin waters were earlier governed by treaty provisions.

"However, the Indus Water Treaty stands suspended effective from 23 April, 2025," the panel recorded.

Under the treaty, Pakistan had rights over the Indus, Jhelum and Chenab rivers, while India controlled the Ravi, Beas and Sutlej.

The Expert Committee granted approval, allowing construction tenders for the project, estimated to cost over Rs 3,200 crore PHOTO: PTI

With the pact suspended, the government has pushed forward projects including Sawalkote, Ratle, Bursar, Pakal Dul, Kwar, Kiru and Kirthai.

Dulhasti Stage-II extends the 390 MW Dulhasti Stage-I project, operational since 2007 under NHPC.

It involves diverting water through a 3,685-metre tunnel to a pondage, along with surge and pressure shafts and an underground powerhouse with two 130 MW units.

The ambitious project requires 60.3 hectares of land, including 8.27 hectares of private land from Benzwar and Palmar. *—PTI*

Woman raped in varsity premises in Jabalpur, two held

JABALPUR, 27 DEC

A 22-year-old woman was allegedly raped by a university clerk in Jabalpur, MP, after being lured with a job promise, police said on Saturday.

The incident occurred at Jawaharlal Nehru Agricultural University. Authorities arrested Durga Shankar Singerha, 58, an upper division clerk, and Mukesh Sen, a peon, on Thursday in connection with the case.

The victim, a resident of Tilwara, had seen contractual job vacancies at the university on social media. While seeking contact details, she reached a number linked to the VC's office, where Singerha allegedly spoke to her, asked her to bring documents, and assured her of employment.

Police said Singerha repeatedly met the woman, claiming the recruitment process was ongoing. On Thursday, he allegedly called her to Sen's house on campus, where the peon left after locking the door. The woman claimed Singerha raped her despite her protests. The accused allegedly threatened her. She reported the matter to her family. *—PTI*

DELHI AIR REMAINS 'VERY POOR'

NEW DELHI, 27 DEC

A dense fog blanketed Delhi on Saturday morning as air quality remained in the 'very poor' category, underscoring pollution concerns in the national capital.

Data from the Central Pollution Control Board showed the city's overall Air Quality Index at 355 at 9am, placing it within the 'very poor' range.

According to CPCB standards, an AQI between 301 and 400 is classified as 'very poor', while readings above 400 are considered 'severe'.

The India Meteorological Department said Delhi recorded a minimum temperature of 7.8 degrees Celsius. Foggy conditions are likely to persist through the day, with the maximum temperature expected to hover around 22 degrees Celsius.

Relative humidity stood at 100 per cent at 8.30am, the office said. *— PTI*

ED names 59 more in Chh'garh liquor scam

RAIPUR, 27 DEC

The Enforcement Directorate (ED) has filed a final prosecution complaint in the Chhattisgarh liquor scam, naming 59 new individuals and raising the total accused in the money laundering case to 81. The complaint, submitted to the PMLA court on Friday, follows Supreme Court directions, ED counsel Saurabh Kumar Pande said.

The new accused include Soumya Chaurasia, former deputy secretary in the Chief Minister's office, ex-IAS officer Niranjan Das, liquor license holders, distributors, and excise officials. The 315-page complaint is supported by nearly 29,800 pages of evidence, including banking records, money-laundering trails, and digital communications.

The ED alleges Das, then excise commissioner, enabled the scam, allowing it to continue unchecked. The alleged fraud, under the Bhupesh Baghel-led Congress government (2019–2022), is estimated to have yielded around Rs 3,000 crore, causing massive loss to the state exchequer.

Earlier arrests include Congress MLA Kawasi Lakhma, Chaitanya Baghel, businessman Anwar Dhebar, and ex-IAS officer Anil Tuteja. Probe suggest proceeds could exceed Rs 3,500 crore. *—PTI*

Protest erupts over MBBS admissions in J&K

JAMMU, 27 DEC

Dozens of protesters gathered outside Lok Bhavan in Jammu on Saturday, burning an effigy of Lt Governor Manoj Sinha and demanding the revocation of the MBBS admission list at Shri Mata Vaishno Devi Institute of Medical Excellence in Reasi.

The protest was organised by the newly-formed Shri Mata Vaishno Devi Sangharsh Samiti, a coalition of right-wing groups, and saw participation from JK BJP women activists and trade leaders, including Arun Gupta, president of the Jammu Chamber of Commerce and Industries.

Demonstrators blocked the main road outside Lok Bhavan, causing traffic congestion for over an hour, while police were deployed to maintain law and order and prevent protesters from entering the complex.

Police try to push back protesters during a stir, organised by Shri Mata Vaishno Devi Sangharsh Samiti, in Jammu and Kashmir's Reasi, outside Lok Bhavan in Jammu PHOTO: PTI

- Protesters gathered outside Lok Bhavan in Jammu, burning an effigy of Lt Governor Manoj Sinha and demanding the revocation of the MBBS admission list

Samiti convener Colonel Sukhvir Singh Mankotia said the protest would continue until their demands were met, emphasising they were not against any religion but wanted the medical college seats reserved for Hindu students.

The controversy followed admissions for the inaugural MBBS batch, which included 42 Muslim, seven Hindu, and one Sikh student. *—PTI*

COP TOUCHES FEET

Row after priest lands in Raipur on govt jet

RAIPUR, 27 DEC

A political row erupted in Chhattisgarh after a video surfaced showing Bageshwar Dham head Dhirendra Shastri arriving in Raipur aboard a government aircraft and an on-duty police officer touching his feet, triggering allegations of misuse of public resources.

Shastri, accompanied by state minister Guru Khushwant Saheb, landed in Raipur on Thursday ahead of a religious discourse in Bhilai, Durg district.

The widely circulated clip shows the officer saluting the minister, removing his cap and shoes, and bowing before the preacher, raising questions over official conduct and the use of a state aircraft for a religious figure.

The Congress accused the BJP-led government of wasting public money and violating constitutional norms. State Congress communication department head Sushil Anand Shukla said arranging a government aircraft for Shastri amounted to "misuse of the state exchequer" and sought an official explanation on the authority under which the aircraft was deployed. He also claimed Shastri was neither a recognised religious head nor a peethadhishwar, accusing him of promoting social discord.

An on-duty police officer touches feet of Bageshwar Dham head Dhirendra Shastri (red circled), upon his arrival in Raipur PHOTO: ANI SCREENGRAB

The BJP rejected the allegations, calling the officer's gesture an expression of personal faith. State BJP chief spokesperson and MP Santosh Pandey said there was no bar on a policeman offering obeisance to a religious guru, and accused the Congress of targeting Sanatana Dharma. He also questioned the Congress over instances of government aircraft allegedly being used during its tenure.

A senior police official said no action has been taken against the officer, who is posted as station house officer of Mana Basti police station. *—PTI*

Strike over doc's termination disrupts healthcare across HP

SHIMLA, 27 DEC

Medical services across Himachal Pradesh (HP) were disrupted on Saturday as resident doctors began an indefinite strike against the termination of a colleague accused of assaulting a patient, with only emergency services operational.

Hospitals reported closures of outpatient departments and elective surgeries, leaving patients, especially from remote areas, stranded. Attendants said peak winter cold and accommodation shortages amid the New Year tourist rush worsened difficulties.

The strike follows the termination of Dr Raghav Narula after a physical altercation with a patient at Indira Gandhi Medical College, Shimla. A viral video from the pulmonary ward showed the doctor punching the patient during a confrontation. While the patient alleged provocation over language, Narula claimed he was abused first.

An inquiry committee held both parties at fault, citing misconduct on the doctor's part.

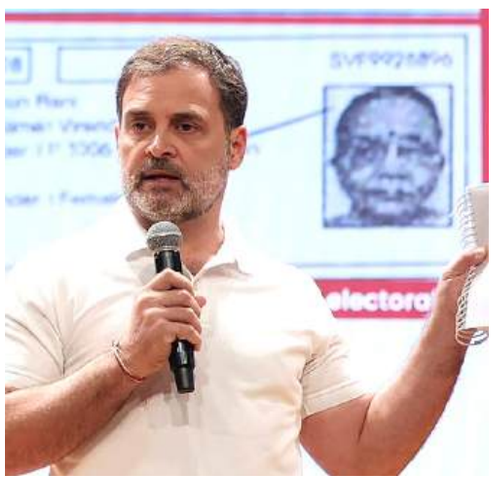
The Resident Doctors' Association said routine care would remain suspended, though emergency services continue. Medical bodies have backed the doctor, demanding reinstatement, an inquiry and security.

Chief Minister Sukhvinder Singh Sukhu assured action against those who threatened doctors and promised guidelines. *—PTI*

JUMBOS' DAY

Elephants participated in a penalty shootout competition during the annual Elephant and Tourism Festival in Nepal's tourist town of Sauraha on Friday, drawing hundreds of spectators. The animals marched from the Chitwan National Park gate to the festival venue, marking the return of the event after several years following objections from animal rights activists. The 19th edition introduced the football-style contest to boost tourism and promote elephant conservation. Held at the Baghmara Buffer Zone Community Forest, the festival runs until Monday, featuring cultural shows, elephant beauty contests ***PHOTO: ANI***

EC PUSHES FOR SIR AMID 'VOTE THEFT' ROW



2025 was marked by a sharp confrontation between Congress leader Rahul Gandhi and Chief Election Commissioner Gyanesh Kumar over allegations of vote theft ***PHOTO: PTI***

Battling allegations of "vote chori" levelled by the Opposition Congress, the Election Commission (EC) carried out a special intensive revision (SIR) of electoral rolls in 13 states and Union territories this year, along with a separate "special revision" in Assam. The poll authority is now preparing to extend the exercise to the remaining 22 states and Union territories in phases in 2026.

While the SIR was completed in Bihar, it remains ongoing in Assam and 12 other states and Union territories, covering nearly 60 crore electors. The remaining 40 crore voters will be brought under the exercise next year, EC officials said.

Officials said the revision process, which kept the poll panel firmly in the spotlight through the year, had so far been successful and would continue as planned. With voter details now being digitised, they added that future clean-up exercises could become more automated and backend-driven.

Apart from the SIR, the EC also conducted Assembly elections in Bihar during the year. Notably, the polls passed off without any major election-day violence — a first in decades — and no repoll was recommended at any polling station across the state's 243 Assembly constituencies.

Bihar also became the first state where polling booth rationalisation was implemented, reducing the maximum number of voters per polling station from 1,500 to 1,200 to ease queues and improve the voting experience.

The poll authority introduced several other voter-friendly measures. Electors were allowed to carry mobile phones up to the outer perimeter of polling stations and deposit them in designated boxes — a departure from the earlier blanket ban on phones with no deposit facility.

The year, however, was marked by a sharp confrontation between Congress leader Rahul Gandhi and Chief Election Commissioner Gyanesh Kumar over allegations of vote theft. In an unprecedented move, the CEC sought an apology from a senior political leader, asserting that allegations made without proof undermined public trust in the electoral process.

Several INDIA bloc leaders claimed that the SIR would deprive crores of genuine voters of their franchise due to documentation issues. Political parties approached the Supreme Court seeking a ban on the exercise. The court, however, refused to halt the revision, holding that the EC was empowered to conduct SIR to clean electoral rolls. It did, however, direct the Commission to accept Aadhaar as the 13th permissible document for voter enrolment.

Following the publication of Bihar's final electoral roll, opposition reactions were muted. The Opposition's attempt to link the SIR with alleged vote theft appeared to have little impact on voters during the Bihar Assembly elections.

Ahead of the Bihar revision, EC officials had claimed that grassroots functionaries had identified several foreign nationals from Bangladesh, Nepal and Myanmar on electoral rolls. However, the Commission later did not provide any figures or evidence to substantiate the claim. Opposition parties accused the EC of using such assertions as a pretext to target voters not aligned with the BJP and its allies.

Learning from the Bihar experience, the EC modified procedures for the remaining 12 states and Union territories. Electors were permitted to submit documents after handing over partially filled enumeration forms if back-room personnel failed to map their names with the final electoral roll from the previous SIR.

In most states, the last SIR was conducted between 2002 and 2004. Officials said that the majority have now nearly completed mapping current voters with data from those earlier revisions.

The primary objective of the SIR is to weed out illegal foreign migrants by verifying place of birth — a move that assumes added significance amid ongoing crackdowns on undocumented migrants, particularly from Bangladesh and Myanmar, in several states.

Earlier this month, the EC extended the SIR timeline in six states and Union territories following requests from chief electoral officers. Revised schedules were issued for Tamil Nadu, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, the Andaman and Nicobar Islands and Uttar Pradesh.

The enumeration period for Tamil Nadu and Gujarat was extended until December 14, with draft electoral rolls published on December 19. In Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, enumeration was extended until December 18 and draft rolls published on December 23. Uttar Pradesh's enumeration period was extended until December 26, with draft rolls scheduled for publication on December 31.

Enumeration in Goa, Puducherry, Lakshadweep, Rajasthan and West Bengal ends on Thursday, with draft electoral rolls already published on December 16. Kerala's schedule was revised earlier, with enumeration ending on December 18 and draft rolls published on December 23.

To ensure that no eligible voter is excluded, the EC has urged new electors to submit Form 6 either to block-level officers or online via the ECINet app or website. The final electoral rolls will be published in February next year. *—PTI*

SALAR

Aid cuts push Afghans into hunger as winter bites

For 10 hours a day, Rahimullah sells socks from a cart on the streets of eastern Kabul, earning between $4.50 and $6 a day. It is barely enough to survive, but it is all he has to feed his family of five.

Like many Afghans, Rahimullah goes by one name. He is among millions who depend on humanitarian assistance from Afghan authorities and international aid agencies to survive. But that lifeline is rapidly disappearing.

Nearly half of Afghanistan's population, an estimated 22.9 million people, required humanitarian aid in 2025, according to the International Committee of the Red Cross. Severe cuts in international assistance, including the suspension of US funding for programmes such as food distribution by the UN World Food Programme (WFP), have sharply reduced aid deliveries.

The consequences are stark. More than 17 million Afghans now face crisis levels of hunger this winter, the WFP warned last week, three million more than a year ago.

The cuts come at a time when Afghanistan is reeling from a battered economy, recurrent droughts, two deadly earthquakes and the mass return of refugees expelled from neighbouring countries such as Iran and Pakistan. These overlapping shocks have stretched already scarce resources, particularly housing and food.

Addressing the UN Security Council in mid-December, humanitarian chief Tom Fletcher said the crisis was being compounded by increasing restrictions on aid access and humanitarian staff. While nearly 22 million Afghans are expected to need UN assistance in 2026, reduced donor contributions mean the UN will prioritise just 3.9 million people facing the most urgent, life-threatening needs.

"This winter is the first in years with almost no international food distribution," Fletcher said. As a result, only around one million of the most vulnerable Afghans received food assistance during the 2025 lean season, down from 5.6 million last year.

The funding shortfall has devastated humanitarian organisations, forcing them to cut thousands of jobs and slash operations. "As we look towards 2026, we risk a further contraction of life-saving help — at a time when food insecurity, health needs, strain on basic services and protection risks are all rising," Fletcher warned.

The return of millions of refugees has added further pressure. Afghanistan's Minister of Refugees and Repatriation Affairs, Abdul Kabir, said 7.1 million Afghan refugees have returned over the past four years.

Rahimullah, 29, is one of them. A former Afghan Army soldier, he fled to Pakistan after the Taliban seized power in 2021. Two years later, he was deported back to Afghanistan. Initially, he received food and cash assistance, which helped him survive.

"Without it, now I don't have enough money to live on," he said. "God forbid, if I face a serious illness or another problem, it would be very difficult because I have no extra money."

The influx of returnees has also sent rents soaring. Rahimullah's landlord has nearly doubled the rent of his two-room home — half concrete, half mud — from 4,500 afghanis ($67) to 8,000 afghanis ($120). Unable to afford it, Rahimullah, his wife and their three children will be forced to move next month, with nowhere to go.

Before the Taliban takeover, Rahimullah earned a stable income and his wife worked as a teacher. Today, she is unemployed due to the government's restrictions barring women from most jobs.

"Even if we find money for flour, we don't have it for oil. If we find it for oil, we can't pay the rent," he said. "Then there is the electricity bill."

In the northern province of Badakhshan, the situation is equally dire. Sherin Gul, a mother of 10, said aid delivered in 2023 — flour, oil, rice, beans and biscuits — sustained her family of 12 for six months. Since then, there has been nothing.

Her husband is elderly and unable to work. The burden has fallen on her 23-year-old son, the only family member capable of earning, but he finds only occasional labour.

"One person working cannot cover the expenses," Gul said. "We are in great trouble."

Neighbours sometimes share food. Often, the family goes hungry. "There have been nights when my children have fallen asleep crying without food," she said. "I have only given them green tea."

Gul once worked as a cleaner, but the ban on women working left her unemployed. She says she has since developed a nervous disorder and is frequently ill.

Winter has compounded their suffering, as snow halts construction work and increases the cost of firewood and charcoal.

"If this continues, we may face severe hunger," she said. "And it will be very difficult to survive in this cold weather." *—PTI*

More than 17 million Afghans now face crisis levels of hunger this winter, the WFP warned last week, three million more than a year ago ***PHOTO: PTI***

LETTERS

write to us at salarenglishdigital@gmail.com

'Heatwaves, wildfires, droughts & storms cost world $120B in 2025'

Heatwaves, wildfires, droughts, and storms cost the world more than USD 120 billion in 2025, according to a new report analysing the escalating cost of climate change.

The report by UK-based NGO Christian Aid underscores the cost with fossil fuel companies playing a central role in driving the crisis. The report noted that cost of climate inaction is equally clear, as communities continue to bear the brunt of a crisis that could have been averted with urgent action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

"These disasters are not natural, they are the predictable result of continued fossil fuel expansion and political delay," said Emeritus Professor Joanna Haigh, at Imperial College London.

The ten most financially costly events all had an impact of more than USD billion with the combined total topping more than USD 122 billion in damage. Most of these estimates are based only on insured losses, meaning the true financial costs are likely to be even higher, while the human costs are often uncounted.

The report also highlighted ten extreme weather events that didn't rack up big enough insured losses to make the top ten but were just as devastating and often affected millions.

"These included several events in poorer countries where many people don't have insurance and where data is less available. In terms of events which caused the biggest financial cost in 2025, the US bore the brunt, with the fires in California topping the list as the single biggest one-off event at USD 60 billion in damage and leading to the deaths of more than 400 people," the report said.

Second on the list was the cyclones and floods that struck Southeast Asia in November causing USD 25 billion in damage and killing more than 1,750 people across Thailand, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Vietnam and Malaysia.

"Third were the devastating floods in China which displaced thousands, caused USD 11.7 billion in damage and killed at least 30. No continent was spared from crippling climate disasters in 2025, with at least one disaster in each of the six populated regions of the world making the report.

"Drought in Brazil, summer wildfires in Spain and Portugal and February cyclones in Australia and Réunion island off the coast of Africa meant no corner of the world was spared," it said.

Asia accounted for four of the top six costliest disasters with flooding in India and Pakistan killing more than 1,860 people, costing up to $6 billion and affecting more than 7 million people in Pakistan alone.

Second on the list was the cyclones and floods that struck Southeast Asia in November causing USD 25 billion in damage ***PHOTO: PTI***

More than USD 5billion in damage was caused by typhoons in the Philippines with more than 1.4 million people displaced.

While the top ten focuses on financial costs, which are usually higher in richer countries because they have higher property values and can afford insurance, some of the most devastating extreme weather events in 2025 hit poorer nations, which have contributed little to causing the climate crisis and have the least resources to respond.

- Heatwaves, wildfires, droughts, and storms cost the world more than USD 120 billion in 2025, according to a new report analysing the escalating cost of climate change. The report by UK-based NGO Christian Aid underscores the cost with fossil fuel companies playing a central role in driving the crisis

"These included flooding in Nigeria in May and the Democratic Republic of Congo in April, which affected thousands with potentially up to 700 deaths in Nigeria alone. The ongoing drought in Iran and West Asia threatened the 10 million people in Tehran with possible evacuation due to a water crisis.

"Making the second list of 10 was also some events that stood out for being particularly unusual such as the record breaking heat that led to wildfires in the highlands of Scotland, with 47,000 hectares burned. Japan faced an extreme year of both heavy snowstorms and record breaking heatwaves," it said.

Worrying climate related extremes were also recorded in Antarctica and the world's oceans which recorded record breaking sea temperatures and coral bleaching in West Australia which pose major threats to biodiversity.

The report said these extreme events highlight the need for more urgent action to reduce carbon emissions and accelerate the transition to renewable energy and underlines the importance of providing funding for vulnerable people.

"This year has once again shown the stark reality of climate breakdown. Violent storms, devastating floods and prolonged droughts are turning lives and livelihoods upside down. The poorest communities are first and worst affected.

"These climate disasters are a warning of what lies ahead if we do not accelerate the transition away from fossil fuels. They also underline the urgent need for adaptation, particularly in the global South, where resources are stretched and people are especially vulnerable to climate shocks," said Patrick Watt, Christian Aid CEO. *—PTI*

PHOTO: FREEPIK

Indian-origin student held in US for arson threats

HOUSTON, 27 DEC

A 22-year-old Indian-origin student Manojh Sai Lella, a senior at the University of Texas at Dallas was arrested in the US on charges of arson and terroristic threat against family members, according to official records. Frisco police on Monday responded to Lella's home after family members reported a mental health episode and alleged threats. Authorities said he allegedly tried to set the home on fire several days earlier. Lella faces arson with intent to damage a habitat or place of worship, a first-degree felony, and terroristic threat of a family/household member, a Class A misdemeanor. Police stressed there is no evidence of a threat to a place of worship. *—PTI*

13 'terrorists' killed in Balochistan

KARACHI, 27 DEC

Pakistani security forces have killed at least 13 terrorists belonging to outlawed insurgent groups in different intelligence-based operations in the troubled Balochistan province, the ISPR said Saturday. According to the Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR), the military's media wing, these terrorists were killed in two operations conducted on 24 and 25 December in the Kohlu and Kalat areas of the province. In two statements, the ISPR said the intelligence-based operations (IBOs) were conducted on the reported presence of terrorists in the respective areas. In the IBO in Kohlu on Thursday, the ISPR said it killed five terrorists after a heavy exchange of fire with them. *—PTI*

2 more die in Syria mosque bombing, taking toll to 8

IDLIB, 27 DEC

Two more people died in bombing at the Imam Ali ibn Abi Talib Mosque in Homs during Friday prayers taking the toll to eight with 18 people still wounded. Images released by Syria's state-run media depict shattered windows and bloodied carpets in the mosque, located in the Alawite-dominant Wadi al-Dhahab neighbourhood. Syria's Interior Ministry reported that explosive devices were planted inside the mosque and a manhunt is underway for the perpetrators. A little-known group, Saraya Ansar al-Sunna, has claimed responsibility for the attack, which followed a deadly church bombing in June. UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres condemned the attack, urging justice for the victims. The Supreme Alawite Islamic Council held the Syrian government accountable. *—PTI*

Spanish family missing after boat sinks in Indonesia

JAKARTA, 27 DEC

Indonesian rescue teams on Saturday searched for a Spanish family of four after a tour boat carrying 11 people sank overnight near Padar Island in Komodo National Park, officials said. The boat, carrying six Spanish tourists, four crew members and a local guide, went down Friday evening after suffering engine failure while travelling from Komodo Island to Padar, said Fathur Rahman, head of the Maumere Search and Rescue Office. Three people were rescued by a passing vessel and four others by rescue teams. "The missing passengers are a Spanish family — a husband, wife and two children," Rahman said. Rough seas and darkness hampered overnight efforts, but searches intensified Saturday morning as conditions improved. Komodo National Park is a popular UNESCO-listed tourist destination. *—PTI*

20 hurt in mob attack at James' concert in B'desh

The event held at a school was called off

A mob tried to forcibly enter the concert after being turned away in Faridpur, Bangladesh, on late Friday; James (inset) ***PHOTO: SCREENGRAB***

DHAKA, 27 DEC

At least 20 students were injured in a mob attack in Bangladesh that forced the cancellation of a concert by popular rock singer James, who has also sung several hit Hindi film songs, officials and organisers said.

The incident occurred on Friday night in Faridpur, amid a recent spate of attacks on cultural institutions in the country. Organisations such as Chhayanaut and Udichi Shilpi Goshthi in Dhaka have been vandalised.

James' concert was to be held late at night on a temporary stage set up within the school premises. However, just before the programme was due to begin, a group tried to force entry after being turned away, throwing bricks and stones and attempting to seize the stage.

Students of the school resisted the attackers, and at least 20 were injured by flying debris, according to the organisers.

However, Additional Superintendent of Police (Sadar Circle) Azmir Hossain said the exact number of casualties was yet to be confirmed.

In the wake of the volatile situation, organising committee convener Mustafizur Rahman Shamim cancelled the show on the orders of the Faridpur district administration.

James, the lead singer, songwriter and guitarist of the Bangladeshi rock band Nagar Baul, has sung in several hit Bollywood films, including 'Gangster', 'Woh Lamhe', and 'Life in a... Metro'.

Rajibul Hasan Khan, convener of the programme's publicity and media sub-committee, said the reasons behind the attack remained unclear. *—PTI*

After 17 years of self-exile, Tarique registers as voter

DHAKA/NEW DELHI, 27 DEC

BNP acting chairman Tarique Rahman on Saturday completed the formalities to enlist himself on Bangladesh's voter list and obtain a national identity (NID) card, two days after his return from over 17 years of self-exile in London.

The 60-year-old leader of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) visited the Election Commission (EC) office in Dhaka under tight security, where he provided fingerprints and iris scans for biometric enrollment, news portal tbsnews.net reported.

He earlier submitted his voter registration application online, officials said.

He is expected to receive his NID card within 24 hours, the official said.

Rahman's daughter Zaima also completed her registration formalities for the NID card.

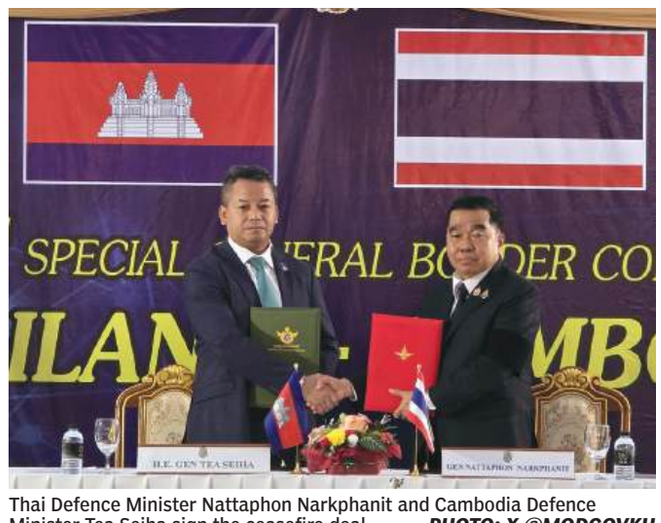
Bangladesh first introduced a voter list with photographs and biometric data in 2008 during the military-backed caretaker government led by Fakhruddin Ahmed that followed the 2007–2008 political crisis.

Rahman, son of former prime minister Khaleda Zia, was a political prisoner when the voter list with photographs and biometric data was introduced in 2008. After his release from prison, he left for London on 11 September, 2008. He did not register as a voter during the subsequent Sheikh Hasina-led Awami League rule.

However, the now banned Awami League questioned how the Rahman was allowed to register as a voter when the final list has already been prepared. *—PTI*

Thailand, Cambodia sign ceasefire to end fighting

BANGKOK, 27 DEC



Thai Defence Minister Nattaphon Narkphanit and Cambodia Defence Minister Tea Seiha sign the ceasefire deal ***PHOTO: X @MODGOVKH***

Thailand and Cambodia on Saturday signed a ceasefire agreement to end weeks of armed combat along their border over competing claims to territory. It took effect at noon local time.

In addition to ending fighting, the agreement calls for no further military movements by either side and no violations of either side's airspace for military purposes.

Cambodia said that Thailand had launched massive airstrikes on its territory as early as Saturday morning. The Cambodian Defence Ministry accused Thailand of using F-16 fighter jets to drop at least four bombs on targets, many of which were civilian infrastructure.

Another major clause calls for Thailand "after the ceasefire has been fully maintained for 72 hours" is to repatriate 18 Cambodian soldiers it has held as prisoners since earlier fighting in July.

Their release has been a major demand of the Cambodian side.

The original July ceasefire was brokered by Malaysia and pushed through by pressure from US President Donald Trump. However, it fell apart after minor cross-border violence escalated into widespread heavy fighting.

Despite those deals, the two countries carried on a bitter propaganda war and minor cross-border violence continued, escalating in early December to widespread heavy fighting.

Thailand has lost 26 soldiers and one civilian as a direct result of the combat since 7 December.

Thailand has also reported 44 civilian deaths from collateral effects of the situation. Cambodia hasn't issued an official figure on military casualties, but says that 30 civilians have been killed and 90 injured.

Hundreds of thousands of people have been evacuated from affected areas on both sides of the border. *—PTI*

Myanmar to vote tomorrow in first election since military takeover

MANDALAY, 27 DEC

Officials of the Union Election Commission set up electronic voting machine ahead of the first phase of polls in Yangon, Myanmar ***PHOTO: PTI***

Myanmar is set to hold its first election since the military assumed power in a coup nearly five years ago, an event that marked the beginning of the ongoing civil conflict. But the poll, already delayed many times by the junta, is widely believed to be an election staged by the military rulers

Voting is scheduled to take place in three stages over a month, but large parts of the country still engulfed by war will be unable to participate. Even where voting occurs, it is marked by fear and intimidation. Myanmar faces one of Asia's most severe humanitarian crises, driven by ongoing civil conflict and repeated natural disasters.

Junta leader Min Aung Hlaing, charged by the UN and human rights groups with genocide, appears confident ahead of the election. In July, military authorities imposed a new law criminalising "any speech, organising, inciting, protesting, or distributing leaflets aimed at undermining any part of the electoral process." The most popular party, the National League for Democracy, has been dissolved, and its leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, remains detained in an undisclosed location. *—Agencies*

A bomb squad secures the scene of a US airstrike in Jabo, Sokoto state, northwest Nigeria, on Friday ***PHOTO: X***

Nigerian villagers say no IS activity in places US bombed

JABO, 27 DEC

Nigerian villagers near places that the US bombed reportedly said that they were unaware of any activity by the Islamic State nearby, as they described the fear and confusion of the strikes. They said that Jabo village, near where the strikes took too place, has never been attacked as part of the violence against Christians the US says is widespread.

"We've never seen anything like this before," said Suleiman Kagara, a local resident, adding that the village has no history of extremist activity, CNN reported. However, villagers concede that terrorism is a problem.

Sanusi Madabo, a 40-year-old farmer, was preparing for bed on Thursday night when he heard a loud noise. He rushed outside with his wife to see the sky glowing a bright red.

The light burned bright for hours, Madabo said: "It was almost like daytime."

US President Donald Trump announced late on Thursday that the US had launched a "powerful and deadly strike" against IS militants in Nigeria. The Nigerian government confirmed that it cooperated with the US government in its strike.

Neither governments released any casualty figures among the militants, but said no civilian was hit. *—Agencies*

'Zelenskyy doesn't have anything till I say'

- Zelenskyy had presented a 20-point peace deal, editing Trump's 28-point proposal. However, despite Ukraine's talks with US envoys, Trump said the revised plan isn't real untill he approves it

WASHINGTON/KYIV, 27 DEC

Ahead of his Sunday meeting with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, US President Donald Trump said that any possible peace deal between Kyiv and Moscow requires his approval.

"He doesn't have anything until I approve it," Trump said about Zelenskyy's 20-point peace deal to end Russia's nearly four year invasion of Ukraine. Zelenskyy edited Trump's 28-point deal after a series of negotiations with American envoys.

"So we'll see what he's got," Trump added.

Trump added that he wanted to speak with Russian President Vladimir Putin "soon".

Zelenskyy said on Friday that that the peace plan is "90 per cent ready". He said that the "highest level" will discuss more contentious issues like territorial concessions and long-term security guarantees.

Trump's comments came a day after Zelenskyy held talks with Trump's special envoy Steve Witkoff and the President's son-in-law Jared Kushner.

Trump also confirmed that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu would be visiting him around the same time.

RUSSIAN BOMBS KILL 1 IN UKRAINE

Russia attacked Ukraine's capital with missiles and drones early on Saturday morning, killing one and wounding over 20 people.

Explosions boomed across the capital for hours as ballistic missiles and drones hit the city. The attack began in the early morning hours on Saturday and was continuing as the day broke.

Russia targeted Ukraine with almost 500 drones and 40 missiles of various types. The main target was energy and civilian infrastructure in Kyiv, Zelenskyy said. In some districts of the region, there is no electricity or heating because of the attacks.

'RUSSIA USING BELARUS TO ATTACK'

Zelenskyy claimed that Russia was launching its drones from neighbouring Belarus to evade Ukraine's air defences. He said that Shahed drones were being placed on Belarusian residential rooftops near the Ukrainian border.

This comes as Russia is reportedly stationing nuclear-capable Oreshnik missiles in eastern Belarus, potentially bolstering its strike capabilities across Europe. *—Agencies*

Israel becomes first country to recognise Somaliland

TEL AVIV, 27 DEC

- Israeli PM Netanyahu signed the agreement with Somaliland President Abdirahman Mohamed Abdullahi. Somaliland broke away from Somalia some 30 years ago

Israel formally recognised Somaliland as an independent country, becoming the first nation to do so around 30 years after the territory broke away from Somalia.

The declaration of mutual recognition was signed by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Israel Foreign Minister Gideon Sa'ar and Somaliland President Abdirahman Mohamed Abdullahi.

The breakaway region is located in a strategically important part of the Horn of Africa, along the Red Sea corridor.

Speaking to President Abdullahi over the phone, Netanyahu described the moment as historic.

Netanyahu said Israel now plans to expand cooperation with Somaliland in multiple sectors, but did not disclose details.

"We intend to work together with you in economic matters and agriculture," he said.

Netanyahu's office said that the declaration was made "in the spirit of the Abraham Accords", a project which started in 2020, to established commercial and diplomatic ties between Israel and several Arab and Muslim-majority countries -- and that Trump sees as key to his plan for bringing long-term stability to the Middle East.

"I congratulated the President of Somaliland, Dr Abdirahman Mohamed Abdallah, and hailed his commitment to peace," Netaynayahu said on X.

Somaliland, a territory of more than 3 million (30 lakh) people seceded from Somalia more than three decades ago, but it has not been internationally recognised as an independent state by any country until now.

Africa's regional governance bodies condemned Israel's move, saying it violated Somalia's sovreignity, and ran contrary to international law. *— Agencies*

THE GAZA ANGLE

US and Israeli officials had earlier said that Israel approached Somaliland about taking in Palestinians from Gaza as part of Trump's plan at the time to resettle the region's population. The US has since abandoned that plan, stressing in the Gaza ceasefire deal that Palestinians would not be expelled from Gaza. However, the reasoning behind Israel recognising Somaliland is unclear.

The foreign ministry of Egypt -- a major mediator in the Israel-Hamas war -- said on social media that it rejects Israel's recognition of Somaliland and stressed full support for Somalia's sovereignty, unity and territorial integrity.

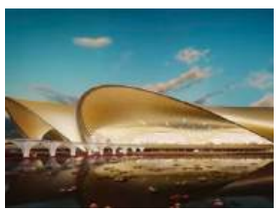


PHOTO: PTI

Navi Mumbai airport sees spike in booking

MUMBAI, 27 DEC

Navi Mumbai International Airport Ltd (NMIA) on Friday said passenger bookings surged on the first day of commercial operations, signaling strong traveler demand. The Adani Group-owned airport began scheduled flights on 25 December. Arrival load rose from 71 per cent on 24 December to 85 per cent on day one, while departure load jumped from 83 per cent to 98 per cent, NMIA said. The airport handled about 5,000 passengers and operated 48 flights, with five airlines connecting nine domestic destinations. Total passenger stood at 4,922 on 25 December and increased to 5,028 on 26 December. Initially operating for 12 hours, the airport will gradually scale from February, explanding Mumbai's aviation capacity. *—PTI*

Ex-Shimla DC appointed GST tribunal member

SHIMLA, 27 DEC

Former Shimla Deputy Commissioner Amit Kashyap has been appointed a Member of the Goods and Services Tax (GST) Appellate Tribunal for the Himachal Pradesh State Bench in Shimla for a four-year term. The appointment was made by the central government after approval from the Appointments Committee of the Cabinet, following an interview by a selection committee headed by the Chief Justice of the Himachal Pradesh High Court, an official statement reportedws. Kashyap, an IAS officer who retired in December 2023, held several key posts and was widely praised for his role as Shimla DC, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. GST Appellate Tribunals aim to ensure speedy and transparent tax justice. *—PTI*

National Consumer helpline refunded Rs 45cr in 2025

NEW DELHI, 27 DEC

As 2025 draws to a close, the government's National Consumer Helpline (NCH) has quietly delivered significant results, resolving 67,265 consumer complaints and securing refunds worth Rs 45 crore between April and December, official data showed. E-commerce accounted for the bulk of grievances, with Rs 32 crore in refunds, followed by travel and tourism at Rs 3.5 crore. Consumers across cities and smaller towns reported delays, defective products and denied refunds. Operating at the pre-litigation stage under the Consumer Protection Act, 2019, the NCH enables faster and low-cost dispute resolution through helplines without visiting consumer courts. *—PTI*

CNG prices will be cut, says THINK Gas

CHENNAI, 27 DEC

Leading gas distributor THINK Gas, formed from the merger of AG&P Pratham and Think Gas, has welcomed the Petroleum and Natural Gas Regulatory Board's (PNGRB) revised Unified Tariff framework, calling it a timely, consumer-focused reform. From 1 January, 2026, customers in Madhya Pradesh, Punjab, Himachal Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Karnataka can expect CNG price cuts of up to Rs 2.50/kg and domestic PNG reductions of up to Rs 5/SCM. THINK Gas will also voluntarily lower PNG prices in Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Rajasthan. CEO Abhilesh Gupta said the move will make natural gas more affordable for households and commuters, . The company serves over 100 million customers via CNG stations and a vast pipeline network across 3.24 lakh sq km. *—PTI*

India gets its first bomb disposal systems

Setting uniform rules for equipment used in bomb threats

NEW DELHI, 27 DEC

The Bureau of Indian Standards (BIS) has notified a dedicated standard for bomb disposal systems to address a critical gap in the country's security preparedness framework and provide manufacturers with clear performance benchmarks.

The new standard, IS 19445:2025, was developed at the request of the Union Ministry of Home Affairs and the Terminal Ballistic Research Laboratory. It establishes comprehensive guidelines for evaluating bomb disposal systems against blast loads and splinter effects.

Consumer Affairs Secretary Nidhi Khare said the standard is intended for "voluntary adoption" by procurement agencies, manufacturers, and testing bodies.

"Its implementation is expected to bring uniformity in evaluation practices, promote quality-driven manufacturing, and enhance confidence in bomb disposal systems deployed in critical security operations," she said in a statement.

While developing, consideration was given to international best practices suitably adapted to Indian operating environments *PHOTO: X*

The standard specifies requirements for test equipment, test range conditions, and evaluation procedures to objectively assess system effectiveness, according to the Consumer Affairs Ministry.

The need for an Indian standard arose because existing international standards are either restricted in access or not fully aligned with the threat profiles and operational conditions faced by Indian forces, the ministry said.

Indian armed forces, central armed police forces, state police, and civilian agencies increasingly encounter threats from unexploded bombs, improvised explosive devices, and hand grenades in conflict zones, cantonment areas, and public places.

Three categories of bomb disposal systems, bomb blankets, bomb baskets, and bomb inhibitors, are commonly deployed to mitigate these risks. While several public and private agencies manufacture such systems in India, their safe deployment requires rigorous and standardised performance evaluation.

The standard serves as a reference for test sponsors, manufacturers, and accredited testing agencies by defining test methodologies, apparatus, test specimens, and acceptance criteria to verify compliance with performance benchmarks.

While developing IS 19445:2025, consideration was given to international best practices and globally accepted performance concepts, suitably adapted to Indian threat scenarios and operating environments. This approach promotes global alignment while maintaining national relevance and supports Indian manufacturers in achieving international competitiveness, the ministry said. *—PTI*

PHOTO: PTI

INR may weaken in 2026: Report

NEW DELHI, 27 DEC

The Indian Rupee is expected to turn weaker in 2026, according to a report by MUFG, a global financial group.

The report forecasts the Indian Rupee weakening. It expects INR to appreciate modestly above the 90 level in 2026, to 90.80 by the quarter ending September 2026."We expect INR to weaken, although FX outflow pressures have been more than anticipated. Our forecasts also imply continued INR weakness against Euro, Japanese Yen and Chinese Yuan," it reported. Higher import needs and soft net FDI may weigh on the India Rupee.

The Indian Rupee breached the 90 mark against the USD in early December, extending its depreciation run through several sessions now, and hitting an all-time low.

"Our FX forecasts reflect our expectation for a wider current account deficit of 1.5 per cent of GDP and soft net FDI flows.

These should offset some improvement in portfolio inflows with our expectation of an eventual trade deal between the US and India, where we assume tariffs will be lowered to 25 per cent from 50 per cent by early 2026," the MUFG report read. MUFG expects RBI to intervene and cap Rupee depreciation actively. *—PTI*

Dairy sector to face tight supply in 2026: Report

A key trend is the shift toward value-added products such as curd, paneer, ghee, and ice cream, caused by impulse purchases *PHOTO:FREEPIK*

NEW DELHI, 27 DEC

India's dairy sector is entering a phase of tighter supply and margin recalibration after three years of disruption, surplus, and recovery. A Systematix Institutional Equities session report notes that post-COVID was challenging, as milk prices failed to cover production costs, leading to lower output.

Supply revived by mid-2023 through renewed farmer engagement, culminating in a sharp rebound during the October 2024–March 2025 period, when production surged nearly 25 per cent, creating a temporary surplus.

The surplus proved short-lived, leaving the industry with limited surplus and firmer procurement costs, even as product prices remained largely stable after the GST cut. Some regional price hikes of Rs 1-1.5 per litre were reported. Industry participants expect procurement cost corrections around April 2026.

Demand has been supported by reduced prices and increased grammage post-GST cut though this has pressured margins. According to Systematix, companies are now evaluating selective price hikes or rolling back higher volumes to restore profitability.

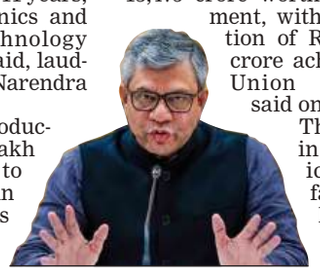
A key trend is the shift toward value-added products such as curd, paneer, ghee, and ice cream, supported by rising impulse purchases. Distribution is also evolving, with quick e-commerce gaining traction while general trade declines. Modern trade continues to offer lower margins and constraining profitability for dairy players.*—ANI*

Indian electronics production grew by 6 times, says Vaishnaw

NEW DELHI, 27 DEC

India saw a ramp-up of electronics production by six times and export increasing eight times in the last 11 years, Minister for Electronics and Information Technology Ashwini Vaishnaw said, lauding Prime Minister Narendra Modi's leadership.

Electronic goods production rose from Rs 1.9 lakh crore in 2014-15 to Rs 11.3 lakh crore in 2024-25. Exports during the period rose from Rs 0.38 lakh crore to Rs 3.3 lakh crore.



Production Linked Incentive Scheme for Large Scale Electronics Manufacturing (LSEM) attracted over Rs 13,475 crore worth of investment, with a production of Rs 9.8 lakh crore achieved, the Union Minister said on X.

The growth in electronics manufacturing in India should be credited to Modi's vision of developing a comprehensive ecosystem. Electronics manufacturing created 25 lakh jobs in the last decade, he said.

Electronics is now India's third-largest export category, climbing from seventh place.

In fact, 99.2 per cent of mobile handsets sold in India are 'Made in India', he claimed.

Mobile phone production rose from Rs 0.18 lakh crore to Rs 5.5 lakh crore, while its exports rose from negligible Rs 0.01 lakh crore to Rs 2 lakh crore, reflecting the 'Make in India' initiative. *—ANI*

Indian Railways to double train capacity from major cities by 2030

NEW DELHI, 27 DEC

Indian Railways plans to double train capacity in 48 major cities by 2030 to meet rising passenger demand for nationwide connectivity.

"In view of the rapid sustained growth in demand for travel, the capacity of major cities to originate new trains needs to be doubledin the next 5 years.

The expansion will cover suburban and non-suburban traffic, with a plan for 48 major cities that includes works planned or already sanctioned, the Railways Ministry said.

Major cities identified include Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata, Chennai, Hyderabad, Bengaluru, Ahmedabad, and Pune.

PHOTO: PTI

Other cities identified for capacity enhancement span northern and central hubs and southern and western cities.

The plan includes expanding existing terminals with new platforms and support infrastructure, developing new coaching terminals and maintenance hubs, and boosting sectional capacity through signalling upgrades and multi-tracking. Nearby stations will also be integrated to ensure a balanced urban rail network development, the Railway's Ministry said. *—ANI*

NCLAT rejects appeal for insolvency plea against Jumbo Finvest

NEW DELHI, 27 DEC

The National Company Law Appellate Tribunal (NCLAT) has dismissed an appeal filed by Equitas Small Finance Bank seeking initiation of insolvency proceedings against Jumbo Finvest, upholding an earlier order of the National Company Law Tribunal (NCLT).

The Jaipur bench of the NCLT had rejected the insolvency plea, holding that Jumbo Finvest qualified as a Financial Service Provider (FSP) under Section 3(17) of the Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code and was not a "corporate person" against whom a Section 7 insolvency application could be filed.

Equitas argued before NCLAT that although Jumbo Finvest was registered with the Reserve Bank of India (RBI), regulatory restrictions imposed in January 2020 — curbs on balance sheet expansion, public fund access and lending — meant it was no longer functioning as an FSP.

Rejecting the contention, NCLAT said the RBI's prohibitory order did not strip Jumbo Finvest of its character as a financial service provider. The tribunal noted that the company's registration was cancelled only on 14 October, meaning it remained an FSP until then. A two-member bench comprising Justice Ashok Bhushan and Technical Member Barun Mitra said proceedings against FSPs must follow the special framework under the IBC, generally requiring regulator initiation. The tribunal clarified that dismissal of the plea would not bar Equitas from pursuing other legal remedies for recovery of its dues. *—PTI*

Odisha plans to finalise mineral blocks auction

BHUBANESWAR, 27 DEC

The Odisha government will hold a high-level meeting on 3 January 2026, to finalise the annual auction calendar for major mineral blocks as well as critical mineral blocks, in line with the Ministry of Mines' directive to bring greater predictability and transparency to the mineral auction process.

A communication from the Department of Steel and Mines, said the meeting will be chaired by the Additional Chief Secretary of the Steel and Mines Department and will be held at 4 pm in the Steel Room of the department in Bhubaneswar.

The Union Ministry of Mines has advised states to publish an annual auction calendar for mineral blocks. As per this, the Directorate of Mines and Geology (DMG), Odisha, has proposed a list of major mineral blocks for inclusion in the state's auction calendar.

The proposed blocks have been explored by the Directorate of Mines and Geology (DoMG), Odisha Mining Corporation (OMC), Geological Survey of India (GSI), and Mineral Exploration and Consultancy Limited (MECL).

The 3 January meeting will review the exploration status and auction readiness of the mineral blocks. *—ANI*

A FIRST IN FOUR DECADE

Adani Group begins reconstruction in Dharavi

- The year saw construction beginning on 6.5 acres of railway land, marking the first tangible progress in over 40 years, to house residents ineligible for on-site rehabilitation.

NEW DELHI, 27 DEC

The Dharavi Redevelopment Project undertaken by the Adani Group reached a significant milestone in 2025, as the plan moved from conceptualisation to construction, says a press release.

The year saw construction beginning on 6.5 acres of railway land, marking the first tangible progress in over 40 years. This development follows the Maharashtra government's allocation of land parcels in the Mumbai Metropolitan Region to house residents ineligible for on-site rehabilitation.

The project is being managed through a special-purpose vehicle that functions as a public-private partnership between the Maharashtra government and a private partner.

The Dharavi Redevelopment Project saw a major milestone achieved this year to integrate the existing 'live-work ecosystem' and industrial identity of the area into a modern urban layout *PHOTO: X*

The state government retains full ownership of the land while the SPV pays a development rights premium to execute the project.

A major milestone achieved this year was the near-completion of a scientific survey of the area. The project introduced Dharavi's first digital twin, which is a computer model used for "faster dispute resolution, transparent decision-making and future-proof governance" to manage this data.

The plan aims to integrate the existing "live-work ecosystem" and industrial identity of the area into a modern urban layout.

The project also launched the 'Dharavi Social Mission' to provide assistance to the local population.

These included vocational training and job placements for youth, as well as healthcare services like cataract surgeries. The mission also helped residents to access government schemes for pensions and education aid.

The master plan includes a township focusing on water and waste systems, energy use, and transit corridors. *—ANI*

PHOTO: PTI

Muddappa blazes to double at Indian Drag Nationals

CHENNAI, 27 DEC

Bengaluru's Hemanth Muddappa strengthened his grip on the title race with two victories and a podium finish in the third and penultimate round of the MMSC FMSCI Indian National Motorcycle Drag Racing Championship here on Saturday. Riding for Mantra Racing, Muddappa stormed to victory in the Unrestricted Super Sport 4-stroke class with 8.269 seconds, edging out Hanuman Pawshe of Fast Track Racing India, who clocked 8.301s. Muddappa also closed the gap with Pawshe as they both are now on 55 championship points each, while Alimon Sai Dalvi is on 53. Muddappa won in the 1051-1650cc category with a timing of 8.542s, ahead of Mujahid Pasha (8.629s) and Alimon Sai Dalvi (8.694s).—*PTI*

PHOTO: PTI

BPL: Dhaka assistant coach Zaki dies

DHAKA, 27 DEC

Dhaka Capitals assistant coach Mahbub Ali Zaki died on Saturday after collapsing on the field ahead of his team's Bangladesh Premier League game against Rajshahi Warriors in Sylhet, with local media reporting he suffered a heart attack. Zaki, 59, fell while the teams were warming up. He was rushed to the hospital, but news of his death reached the ground after the match had already got underway."Mahbub Ali Zaki's dedication and invaluable contribution to the development of fast bowling and Bangladesh cricket will be remembered with profound respect and gratitude," the Bangladesh Cricket Board posted on X.Players of both teams observed a minute's silence during the innings break to pay respect. —*PTI*

10th-ranked Draper not ready to return for Australian Open

LONDON, 27 DEC

Jack Draper, who has played just one tennis match since Wimbledon because of injury, will not be fit for next month's Australian Open. The 10th-ranked Draper's 2025 season was prematurely curtailed by bone bruising in his left arm. "Unfortunately, my team has decided not to head out to Australia this year," the 24-year-old British player said in a video on X on Friday. "It's a really, really tough decision. Obviously, Australia being a Grand Slam, it's one of the biggest tournaments in our sport. The Australian Open in Melbourne starts on 18 January. —*PTI*

PSL franchises: PCB sets ₹ 1.3 billion reserve price

KARACHI, 27 DEC

The Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) is seeking to sell each of its two new teams for the next phase of the Pakistan Super League (PSL) at an annual franchise fee of 1.3 billion Pakistani rupees, according to sources. The PCB is scheduled to hold the final auction on 8 January. Interestingly, the former owners of the Multan Sultans, who relinquished ownership a few weeks ago following differences with the PCB, have submitted initial bid documents to participate in the final auction for the two new teams. However, there is no clarity yet on new owners for the Multan franchise.—*PTI*

England snap 15-year losing streak to win 4th Ashes Test

4th Test becomes the 3rd-shortest match played in Australia

MELBOURNE, 27 DEC

England ended an 18-match winless streak in Australia and beat the home side by four wickets in the fourth Ashes Test at the Melbourne Cricket Ground on Saturday.

England lost the first three tests to allow Australia to retain the Ashes in just 11 days of on-field action at Perth, Brisbane and Adelaide.

But England returned the favour by winning the MCG Test Saturday inside two days, similar to Australia's opening win at Perth.

Ben Stokes and Steve Smith agreed Saturday that a Test match ending in two days was "not what you want, joining some of the biggest names in the game who attacked the state of the Melbourne Cricket Ground pitch. Twenty wickets tumbled on day one of the fourth Test between Australia and England on Friday, with the hosts dismissed for 152 and the tourists just 110.

Another 16 were taken on day two, with the high-profile clash all over within 142 overs inside two days. It was the first time the same series had had multiple two-day tests in 129 years. England's winless streak dated back to the 2013-14 Ashes series, which Australia won 5-0. Since England convincingly won the 2010-11 Ashes 3-1, England had lost 16 matches and drawn the other two of their 18 tests Down Under over a period of nearly 15 years. The fourth Ashes Test between Australia and England in Melbourne ended on the second day on Saturday, becoming the **third-shortest match** (in terms of balls bowled) completed in Australia.

England 110 (Brook 41, Neser 4-45, Boland 3-30) and 178 for 6 (Bethell 40, Richardson 2-22) beat Australia 152 (Neser 35, Tongue 5-45, Atkinson 2-28) and 132 (Head 46, Carse 4-34, Stokes 3-24) by four wickets. —*PTI*

Australian team shake hand with the winning England team PHOTO: PTI

England's Jamie Smith (left) and Harry Brook touch bats during their fourth Ashes Test match against Australia in Melbourne on Saturday PHOTO: PTI

T20I SERIES

Dominant India eye fourth successive win over Sri Lanka

T'PURAM, 27 DEC

Formidable India will be eager to register a dominance-extending fourth victory on the bounce in the fourth Women's T20I against Sri Lanka here on Sunday.

The Harmanpreet Kaur-led team has not even given a chance to its Lankan counterparts to compete in this five-match series, which currently stands 3-0 in favour of the hosts.

It is evident in the fact that India, who chased in all three preceding matches, have not batted more than 14.4 overs, have not lost more than three wickets, and have never faced a target in excess of 129.

The primary credit-holders for that overwhelming success are Indian bowlers. Seasoned spinner Deepti Sharma took four wickets across two matches, and Renuka Singh equalled that feat in a single match at the Greenfield Stadium here on Friday. The toss also might have played a small part, as Harmanpreet called it right on all three occasions and elected to field, giving her bowlers a chance to operate in conditions with lesser dew.But the bowlers have maximised that opportunity spectacularly, not allowing any of the Sri Lankan batters to cross an individual 40 so far.

In this series, India also tried various combinations as well. Arundhati Reddy played the first two matches, while Renuka came in for her pace colleague in the next contest.

"We have been trying different combinations with the (T20) World Cup (2026) in mind. We want to keep our standards high after winning the ODI World Cup recently. And we want our standard and performance to remain high," said Renuka in the post-match press conference here. —*PTI*

TILOTTAMA SEN CLAIMS 3P GOLD AT 68TH NSCC

NEW DELHI, 27 DEC

Tilottama Sen produced a composed performance to notch 466.9 and win the gold medal in women's 50m rifle 3 positions final during the 68th National Shooting Championship Competitions (NSCC) at the MP State Shooting Academy.

The Karnataka shooter carried her strong qualification form into the final to stay ahead of a competitive field. Kerala's Vidarsa K. Vinod secured the silver medal with 462.9, while Railways' Ayonika Paul completed the podium with the bronze medal after scoring 451.8.

Earlier, Tilottama had topped the qualification round with 591-29x, underlining her consistency across all three positions. Vidarsa followed closely in second place with 589-29x, while Karnataka's Anushka H. Thokur had finished third in qualification with 588-33x. In the final, Anushka narrowly missed out on a medal, finishing fourth with 441.2. Ayushi Podder placed fifth with 430.6 (585-30x), followed by Ashi Chouksey, who finished with 430.6 after qualifying on 585-29x. Shriyanka Sadangi (403.9, 585-29x) and Ramita (403.8, 586-29x) rounded off the final lineup.

In the junior women's 50m rifle 3P event, Army's Rituparna Satish Deshmukh delivered a well-paced and controlled final to claim the gold medal with 458.6. Rituparna rose from fourth position in qualification, where she had shot 584-31x, to peak at the right time in the final. Haryana's Nischal mounted a strong challenge but finished just 0.5 points behind to take the silver medal with 458.1. —*PTI*

Pretty happy with the way I was batting this season: Karun

TRIPURA, 27 DEC

It was a forgettable Syed Mushtaq Ali Trophy campaign for Karun Nair. The batter endured a horrific run, mustering just 71 runs from six matches with a lone fifty, and was dropped for the last league match against Tripura.

"I was pretty happy with the way I was batting this season, but probably not in T20. I managed only one fifty, failed a few times, and was disappointed with my performance in SMAT."I am happy I have found my form in the Vijay Hazare Trophy.

It was sacrilegious to even think of dropping Nair, given his rich vein of form in domestic cricket in the last two seasons.After a blockbuster 2024-25 season during which he knocked open the door to the Indian team, Nair was back in the fold for Karnataka in the 2025-26 Ranji Trophy season and has continued to do what he does best, piling runs in First Class cricket.Nair notched a double ton (233) against Kerala, scored an unbeaten century (173 not out) against Goa, and hit a crucial fifty against Saurashtra (73) this season. However, after being retained by the Delhi Capitals in IPL, Nair failed in SMAT, and his drop in form coincided with a sub-par performance of Karnataka in the tournament. —*PTI*

AFTER SOUTH AFRICA'S WHITEWASH

Did BCCI informally look at Gambhir's red-ball replacement?

JAIPUR, 27 DEC

Gautam Gambhir's record as India's white-ball coach has been pretty impressive, with an ICC and ACC trophy in each of the two formats, but with 10 Test defeats against SENA countries, the same cannot be said when it comes to Test cricket.

It is understood that right after India's abject surrender against South Africa in the two-Test series at home last month, someone who matters in the cricket board had once again informally approached VVS Laxman to check if he would be interested in coaching the red ball team.

However, it is learnt that the legendary batter of yesteryears is happy being the 'Head of Cricket' at the Centre of Excellence in Bengaluru.

While Gambhir's contract with BCCI runs until the end of the 2027 ODI World Cup, there is every possibility that it could be revisited, depending upon India's performance in the T20 World Cup, which begins in five weeks.It is understood that in the BCCI corridors, the jury is still out on whether Gambhir is the right person to remain at the helm of the red ball team for the remaining nine Tests of the World Test Championship 2025-27 cycle.

Mhatre named India captain for U19 WC

Ayush Mhatre was on Saturday named captain of the 15-member Indian side for the U-19 World Cup to be held in Zimbabwe and Namibia from January 15 to February 6 next year.

However, along with Vihaan Malhotra, Mhatre will miss the preceding assignment to South Africa, a three-match ODI series, due to their respective wrist injuries.

In their absence, batting prodigy Vaibhav Sooryavanshi will captain India on the tour of South Africa, where all three ODIs will be played at Benoni on January 3, 5 and 7. Aaron George will be the vice-captain. —*PTI*

City go top with 2-1 win at Forest after Cherki heroics

LONDON, 27 DEC

Rayan Cherki was involved in both of Manchester City's goals as Pep Guardiola's side moved temporarily back to the top of the Premier League with a 2-1 win at Nottingham Forest.

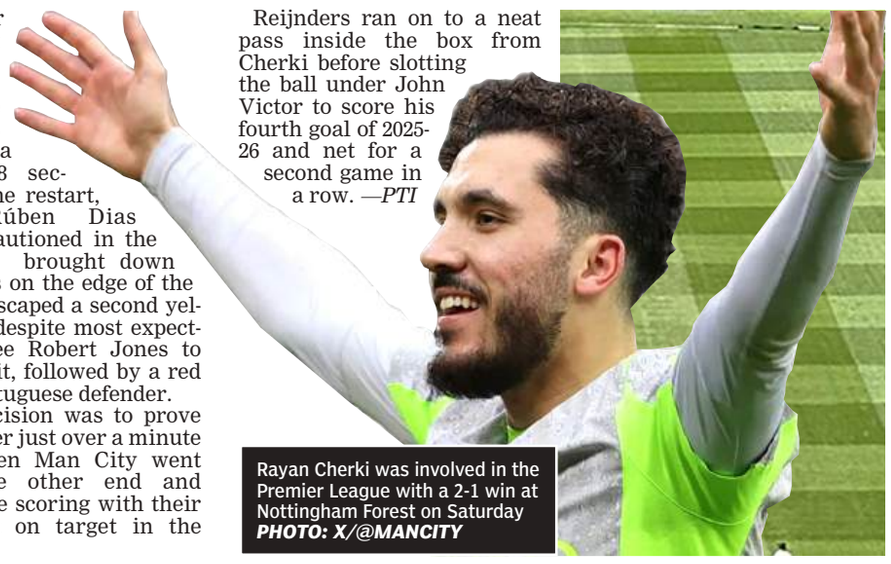
After assisting Tijjani Reijnders' opener just minutes into the second half, Cherki scored himself late on to secure all three points in a tight game at the City Ground.

It was a disappointing first half overall, despite plenty of huff and puff from players on both teams. There wasn't a single shot on target from either side in the opening 45 minutes, arguably more surprising for Man City, who went without one before half-time in a Premier League match for the first time in a year

There was drama within 18 seconds of the restart, when Rúben Dias already cautioned in the first half brought down Igor Jesus on the edge of the box, but escaped a second yellow card despite most expecting referee Robert Jones to brandish it, followed by a red to the Portuguese defender.

That decision was to prove even bigger just over a minute later, when Man City went down the other end and opened the scoring with their first shot on target in the match.

Reijnders ran on to a neat pass inside the box from Cherki before slotting the ball under John Victor to score his fourth goal of 2025-26 and net for a second game in a row. —*PTI*



Rayan Cherki was involved in the Premier League with a 2-1 win at Nottingham Forest on Saturday PHOTO: X/@MANCITY

East Bengal's second straight win

KALYANI, 27 DEC

East Bengal FC picked up their second straight win in the Indian Women's League, defeating the newly-promoted Garhwal United FC 2-1 at the Kalyani Stadium here on Saturday.Sulanjana Raul handed the defending champions the lead in the 22nd minute before Fazila Ikwaput (63rd) doubled the advantage. Garhwal United, who had very little to show in the majority of the match, pulled one back through substitute Monisha Singha (72nd).

Building on their 1-0 win over Sethu on Wednesday, Bengal now sit in fourth place with a perfect record of six points out of a possible six. —*PTI*

GOAL BRINGS FESTIVE CHEER

Dorgu delivers a winner for MU against Newcastle

MANCHESTER, 27 DEC

Patrick Dorgu scored his first goal for Manchester United as his team defeated Newcastle 1-0 in a pulsating Premier League match on Friday.

The 21-year-old Dorgu smashed in a left-foot volley from 15 meters midway through the first half to give United its first home win in four Premier League games, and lift the club above Liverpool into fifth place. But reigning champion Liverpool is at home to bottom club Wolves on Saturday. "It was a good hit. I didn't know I could do that," a delighted Dorgu said.

United was without talismanic captain Bruno Fernandes while several other first-team players were missing due to injury or Africa Cup of Nations duty.

The new-look side also lined up in an unusual back-four formation, but it was a match for Newcastle in an even first half, most notable for Dorgu's fine strike, his first in 38 appearances in a red jersey. United was hampered by the half-time withdrawal of Mason Mount due to injury, and Newcastle dominated the early moments of the second period.

Salah steers Egypt into knockout round

Mohamed Salah scored again for Egypt's 10 men as his team reached the Africa Cup of Nations knockout stage, while host Morocco was forced to wait as VAR provided the main talking point on Friday. Morocco was held 1-1 by Mali in the late Group A game, with both teams awarded penalties following VAR decisions. Earlier, Egypt held on to beat South Africa 1-0 and was grateful that another spot kick wasn't given. Salah, who secured the Pharaohs' opening win with a stoppage-time strike against Zimbabwe on Monday.—*PTI*

Ranchi Royals to bank on home support in Season 2

RANCHI, 27 DEC

Ranchi Royals will look to bank on the home support to dominate the Women's Hockey India League, while JSW Soorma will have the trophy on their minds after a close slip last season when the four-team competition begins here on Sunday.

The home team is coming into the tournament following some turbulence last season, when the inaugural edition winners Odisha Warriors (women's team) became Ranchi Royals after the former withdrew post Season 1.

The new Ranchi Royals franchise took over their spot, retaining some key players and the core squad to represent Jharkhand in Season 2,

marking a new identity for the team. The tournament, to be played exclusively at the Marang Gomke Jaipal Singh Astro Turf Hockey Stadium here, will follow a double round-robin format, with each team facing the others twice in the league phase, following which the top two sides will qualify for the final on 10 January. —*PTI*